TO RULE IN A TURBULENT WORLD VOL.1

乱世为王

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ARC 1: GROPING FOR FISH

摸鱼儿 问莲根有丝多少

【金】元好问

问莲根、有丝多少，莲心知为谁苦？

双花脉脉娇相向，只是旧家儿女。

天已许，甚不教、白头生死鸳鸯浦？

夕阳无语，算谢客烟中，湘妃江上，未是断肠处。

香奁梦，好在灵芝瑞露，人间俯仰今古。

海枯石烂情缘在，幽恨不埋黄土。

相思树，流年度，无端又被西风误。

兰舟少住。怕载酒重来，红衣半落，狼藉卧风雨。

Groping for Fish - Pray the Lotus Root to Number Its Silk Strings

Yuan Haowen (1190-1257) - Jin Dynasty

Pray the lotus root to number its silk strings;[1]

Does its heart know for whom it is bitter?

Lovingly between two blossoms do gaze

A pair of common man and maiden.

Heaven has spoken. But why forbid the Lovebirds[2]

To live until death do them part?

Wordlessly does the setting sun sink. In the mist of Traveler Xie, above the river of concubines Xiang,[3] neither bear the tragedy.

Dreams of Xianlian, pure like ganoderma and ruilu.[4]

The mortal realm reflects antiquity.[5]

The eternal bond of love is present,

Resentment is not buried beneath the yellow earth.

The tree of yearning, as years flow past,

Will once again be harmed by the unprovoked westerly winds.

The fine boat goes infrequent, afraid to carry wine and all repeat. The red robe half-fallen, laid to waste beneath the storm.

This is a poem written for a pair of lovers who married for love, against the custom of the time to marry for mutual gain, and drowned themselves in a lotus pond. That year, all the lotuses in the pond bloomed with two blossoms per stem. The poet laments for the lovers and for the rigid tradition that led to their demise. The verse is emotional, and full of pity and fury.

CHAPTER 1

As the rising sun rolled in from the eastern horizon of the capital, it melted the first snow of the season and left a sheen of frost covering the roof tiles' edges that refracted the golden rays of dawn. In the markets, bustling crowds traversed hither and thither; the horse-drawn carriages went to and fro. The entire city came alive to the forty-nine strikes of the morning bell. Truly, this was the very picture of a peaceful and prosperous world—a beautiful, magnificent land.

It was the first time in three months that You Miao managed to get up in the morning. For once, he was prepared to start fresh and go to school properly. He mounted the horse carriage after breakfast, looking irritated as he leisurely rocked along with the coach that headed for the Imperial College. However, as he passed Zhuque Bridge, he suddenly lost interest in the endeavor.

"Stop, stop," he ordered the driver. "I don't want to go to school today."

And so off he went instead to find his party crowd.

You Miao sat with one leg crossed over the other as the carriage rushed to Changlong West Street. When he arrived at his destination—the chancellor's residence—he noticed that the main entrance was shut, and the side door was empty of anyone standing guard. It wouldn't be ideal if he were to knock brashly and run into the chancellor going out, so instead he made the carriage circle around to the back entrance in search of Li Yan.

Only Li Yan's closest friends could enter through the back door of his house. There weren't many people in the backyard, but the servants of the chancellor's residence all recognized You Miao. They nodded and bowed as they welcomed him in. When You Miao entered, he went straight for the east wing. Just as he passed the stables, there was a sudden wretched yell. A ragged monster pushed out of the firewood shed and fell at his feet.

He had been merely walking along, so this abrupt scare gave him a mighty start and he fell to the ground as well. His boy servants were also startled. They rolled up their sleeves and began to yell—

“What the heck are you doing?!”

“Careful of my young master! I’ll skin you alive if you frighten him!”

“Insolence! Are you trying to kill us?!”

The bodyguards of the residence were startled too, and they rushed over with their whips held high.

You Miao steadied himself. He seemed to have seen a ball of rumpled, tattered clothes, and had thought at first that it was some creature his friend kept. Only when the bodyguards surrounded and began to thrash the dirty figure, lashing him with whips and beat him with rods, did he see that it was a person—and a man at that. When the horsewhip swung down with a resounding crack, the man’s skin split instantly, spilling blood all over.

The man was filthy; his hair was loose and messy like a madman’s. His hands were tied and he hollered as he was beaten in the corner. Inadvertently, his and You Miao’s eyes met. Although the man's eyes were incredibly bright and clear, they were colored with a thirst for blood, much like a wild beast's.

It was the first time You Miao witnessed a situation like this—over a dozen bodyguards whacking a half-dead man so hard that their punishing rods snapped.

“Stop, stop, what’s going on?” You Miao hastily exclaimed.

“The young master says to stop!” barked a boy servant.

The bodyguards stopped the beating. Now at death’s door, the man was propped up by ten sticks and thrown back into the firewood shed. There was a muffled thud inside as his body hit the ground. The second butler of the east wing hurried over and fastened a new lock over the firewood shed’s door.

“Bastard!” he cursed. “Thank goodness You-shaoye wasn’t touched!”

You Miao didn’t know what crime that man had committed, and it wasn’t his place to ask, so he started toward the east wing once more. Around this time, Li Yan had just woken up. Waited on by a row of maids at his side, he was in his chambers looking bored as he ate breakfast. At the sight of You Miao’s arrival, he raised his chopsticks and motioned for him to join. And so, You Miao sat and took a sip of tea. The two ate as they discussed where to go and have fun today, and with whom to hang out.

So who was this Li Yan? Why, he was a good friend You Miao had made at the Imperial College; the little young master of the chancellor’s household.

The current reigning emperor was lazy and a pig; his heart drunk on poetry and songs, on the flowers and the birds and the bees. Following his example, each government official in court was lazier than the next. The chancellor didn’t attend morning court, and as the fish stinks from the head, the chancellor’s son didn’t study either. The young master whiled away his days raising hawks and hosting dog fights, hailing friends from all over.

Two years ago when You Miao entered the Imperial College, the two had been boys and juvenile yet. Once they were acquainted, they began to goof off together. Li Yan spent You Miao’s money, and in turn, You Miao used Li Yan’s connections to befriend a group of young wastrel elites of the imperial capital. When they had nothing to do, they’d roam the streets and dominate the marketplaces, bullying men and women alike.

As for the matter of You Miao himself, he was also no simple character. His ancestors had aggrandized the family fortune through the privatized sale of salt, and after generations of wealth accumulation, the family had become the region’s richest. Twenty-six years ago, his father split off from the house with his share of family assets to start on his own. He grew tea in Jiangbei, the region north of the Yangtze River, and harvested an abundance of wealth; today, his tea fields stretched thousands of acres. He was veritably not a simple man.

Nonetheless, of the four occupation streams—scholarship, agriculture, skilled craft, and commerce[6]—commerce ranked lowest. Thus, You Miao’s father You Dechuan had sprouted the idea to “donate” to secure a title as a

government official[7] for his only son. It was easy to buy a title in this day and age as long as one had the money, but not as easy for those who bought a position to shut gossipers' mouths. And so, You Miao's dad thought to send his son to the capital with some money in order to study and prepare for the imperial exams. He would then "donate" to secure a placement for his son among the third ranks of the palace exam.[8] In doing so, they would become a proper scholar family.

When You Miao first departed for the capital, he was only twelve. As he lived a luxurious life, he brought with him ten massive wagons of everything—from food to necessities, a band of maids and a team of boy servants. He'd raised quite the fanfare when he came to the imperial capital to study.

You Miao's father, You Dechuan, had arranged everything for him—once he reached the capital, he stayed with his paternal uncle. After befriending that group of young wastrel elites at school, he'd blown the three thousand silver his dad had given him within the first year. When the money was gone, You Miao reached out his hand to ask for more from home and was bloodily rebuked by his father in a letter…before another five hundred silver was given to placate him. However, he was also told that if he spent it all by the end of the year, he could go homeless for all Dad cared.

"Hey, boy," said Li Yan, the chancellor's young master, who looked him up and down.

"What?"

You Miao only moved his chopsticks around a bit and stopped eating.

"I heard the Third Prince wants to summon you to the palace," Li Yan said languidly as he chewed his congee. "To have you become his study companion?"

You Miao hadn't known about this at all, but understood immediately after having heard. "Third Prince" referred to the youngest son of the current emperor, Emperor Zhao Mao. Li Yan's chancellor father and four out of the six ministries[9] were in the Crown Prince's faction. While the Third Prince had favor when he was younger, he was nevertheless not born

from the principal wife, the empress—never mind that he was not the eldest son, so he held neither power nor influence within the palace.

You Miao didn't rush to answer. "Really?" He laughed. "It's probably just a joke."

"Who knows? Maybe the imperial court will dispatch someone to pass the order in a few days," Li Yan said. "I heard the Third Prince is the active sort, and likes to have fun. Us bros went out to stroll the lantern markets during this year's Shangyuan Festival,[10] d'you remember?"

You Miao nodded hesitantly. He vaguely recalled the lantern-lit Yuanxiao streets, but it had been a sea of people packed elbow-to-elbow. Who could tell who was who in that chaos?

Li Yan added, "You caught his eye, apparently. After but a single glance from afar at the lantern markets, he told the Grand Tutor to summon you to the palace."

You Miao had fine, delicate features with shapely eyebrows and shining eyes. He was fair-tempered and extravagantly dressed, not to mention his family was rich. The young wastrel elites all loved to hang out with him, pulling him in for a smooch every so often, so it wasn't anything extraordinary that the Third Prince would be interested in him.

"Oh," You Miao said. "Then what kind of character is this Third Prince?"

"What do you care?" Li Yan coolly replied, appearing reluctant now. "Let me ask you, though—will you go or not?"

You Miao crossed his legs and let out a little laugh, *heh-heh*. Normally, anyone would be happy to catch the Third Prince's eye so out of the blue and become his study companion at the palace. You Miao knew his place, though—he often heard Li Yan's group gossip about how the Third Prince would be granted at most a formal Prince[11] title in the future. The one who'd actually ascend the throne was undoubtedly the Crown Prince.

If he joined the Third Prince's camp now, there'd be no cozying up to the Crown Prince later. The reason his father had sent him to the capital to study was so he could buy a government official position, or land a title at

the imperial court—something that'd ruin his future like that was definitely a no-no. He would have to let the Third Prince down.

"It's your call," You Miao said with a smile. "Don't I always listen to you?"

Li Yan lightened up a bit at this. "We bros will have to split if you follow him, so you better think it through. Does that Third Prince you've never met before treat you better than I do?"

You Miao laughed and immediately answered, "Of course you treat me better. Is there even a question when it comes to how close of bros we are?"

After breakfast, a few more of the young masters came, all of them looking barely awake. Li Yan brought out a landscape painting he'd purchased with forty taels of silver and unrolled it to show You Miao, who could tell it was a forgery with a single glance at the signature stamp.

"It's a fake," he said with a scoff.

"And you can tell what's authentic and what's fake just like that, can you?" Li Yan challenged.

"An authentic one is hanging in my dad's room as we speak. Look here, the stamp…"

The young masters snickered. "It's fine as long as you like it," said the son of the Minister of Revenue, who came forward to smooth things over. But Li Yan and You Miao had started arguing again. Li Yan tossed the painting away and glared at You Miao hatefully, while the latter simply drank tea with his legs crossed, remaining bubbly without a care in the world.

A long while after, it was Ping-Er, the son of the Minister of Revenue, who had spoken up again. "What are we gonna do today?"

He was the second oldest at home, so the young wastrels always called him "Ping-Er.[12]" The young wastrels knew to flatter the superior and bully the lesser; to fawn upon the rich and powerful. Of course, the boot of the chancellor's son must be licked, but the salt merchant's principal son was

implicitly higher in rank—although he had no titles to speak of in the capital, he won in terms of money.

The group was merely using You Miao as a wallet, and You Miao himself was well aware of this fact. He often told himself that his dad had sent him here for no other reason than to rank in the exams and mingle with the young wastrel elites. Things got done easier with friends in the imperial court, and it'd also be easier if he allowed his money to do the talk when it came to it in the future.

You Miao looked at the group with a wide grin. "Why don't we hit up Yangfeng Pavilion for some tunes?"

The group agreed enthusiastically. While Li Yan had had his face scrunched up and been ready to fight You Miao just a moment ago, it didn't take long before You Miao laughed it off and smoothed things over with his bubbly teasing. Young men don't hold grudges to begin with, so soon after noon had passed, they huddled together again to hang out.

They filled and satisfied their stomachs with food and booze all the way until sundown, and it was only on the way home that You Miao remembered the incident in the morning. Out of curiosity, he asked Li Yan about it.

"Oh, that was a Quanrong slave," Li Yan said. "I saw him at the Royal Academy[13] and thought it'd be fun, so I bought him."

The Royal Academy? Quanrong slave? Before You Miao could ask more about it, Li Yan had already turned and swaggered home.

Many days later, it was Li Yan's birthday party. That evening, You Miao went over for drinks. The front entrance was jam-packed with guests, so You Miao once again openly swaggered as he'd always done through the back entrance of the chancellor's residence. As he crossed the backyard, he saw several bodyguards beating a gunny sack with rods. Blood was seeping from the bag, dyeing the snowy grounds red. Agonized, angry growls came from inside it.

The weather was cold. You Miao slowed to a stop and watched with his hands tucked in his sleeves. His boy servants only wanted to go inside for a sip of hot liquor, however, so they incessantly urged their young master, "Go in, please; it's cold outside."

Ignoring his servants, You Miao asked, curious, "What are you guys doing?"

A bodyguard replied with a smile, "Orders from the young master. We have to beat this guy dead today."

The sack fell silent.

"What did he do to warrant that?" asked You Miao.

"He offended the young master."

Chancellor Li held overbearing power over the entire imperial court; it was not uncommon for father or son to get rid of people. No one could do anything to stop them, never mind a slave. You Miao was simply a little curious—Li Yan didn't seem this petty, and he'd paid for that Quanrong slave. If Li Yan had gotten sick of playing with him, he could very well give him away or resell him. Why go to the trouble of beating him to death?

You Miao entered the main hall. The house was boisterous and loud, crammed with guests who had come for Li Yan's birthday banquet. There was even a stage set up for a play. Quite a number of people recognized You Miao, and they bantered back and forth with him as he walked in.

As soon as he dropped off his gift, You Miao asked Li Yan, "Why are you having that guy outside beaten to death?"

Li Yan was in the middle of drinking, and replied with disinterest, "Because I feel like it."

You Miao's mind was still preoccupied by the sack, for some reason. He said offhandedly, "Killing someone on your birthday; how unlucky."

"I told them to take it easy with the beating," Li Yan said. "Kill him tomorrow, then bury him somewhere outside the city."

"Look at you. Why do you have to make it such a troublesome thing? Why not just let him go if you can't stand him?" You Miao admonished.

Li Yan's face was souring, and he rebuffed, "Because I feel like it!"

"Okay, okay, okay." You Miao surrendered. He hadn't even intended on saying anything in the first place.

Li Yan shot him another glare. "What did he scream at you?"

"Nothing?" You Miao answered.

Ping-Er huddled over. "You Miao, you want a slave? Next time us bros will take you to the Royal Academy to buy one."

"Him?" Li Yan sounded derisive. "It'll be good if he doesn't get sold *into* the Royal Academy."

"What exactly does that man do for you?" You Miao asked.

Li Yan beckoned You Miao over with his index finger, then pressed his next words against his ear.

"He's a bed warmer. A *man*."

You Miao instantly flushed. Perhaps it was the alcohol, or perhaps it was the heat inside the hall, but the blush spread from his face all the way to the tips of his ears. The young masters all laughed at how innocent he was.

You Miao sized Li Yan up wryly. "Didn't think you were into that," he commented.

"What's wrong with it?" Li Yan retorted. "*I'm* the birthday boy today. *You* wanna warm my bed?"

Uproarious laughter instantly filled the hall. There was a nasty individual among the crowd, a jealous person who generally hated the rich, and resented You Miao and his excellent relationship with Li Yan. He promptly spoke up to inflame the situation.

"Who knows who's the one warming whose bed!"

The crowd laughed boisterously again at the comment. Li Yan turned red in the face, but You Miao was quite pleased and chuckled in delight. After three rounds of drinks, Li Yan's words came back to You Miao as he listened to the play and watched the one warrior actor and the one boy actor turn in circles *yee*-ing and *yaa*-ing.

He put his arm around Li Yan and leaned on him. With his eyes still trained on the play, You Miao asked curiously next to Li Yan's ear, "I know how it works with women, but how do men warm another man's bed?"

Li Yan was annoyed now. "Are you done? Do you really want to warm my bed?" he questioned.

"Lend him to me. I wanna try playing with something new, too," You Miao said.

"I've ruined that Quanrong slave's face. I'll take you to buy a more energetic one next time we're out," Li Yan said.

"Why is he called a Quanrong slave?"

"Because he's a Quanrong. Captured from the north."

"Why is his face ruined?"

"'Cause I beat him."

"Why'd you beat him?"

Li Yan glared at him, but You Miao only beamed. He did this every time, smiling so cheekily and shamelessly that no one could take him seriously.

"He won't talk," Li Yan finally said. "I told him to talk, but he wouldn't, so I stuffed my shoe in his mouth and made him crawl in the mud with his ass up. He dared fight back, so I smashed him with a vase a bunch of times and locked him up."

You Miao understood now—Li Yan must've gotten hit, and that Quanrong slave's retaliating blows were probably not meek. The play went on for a while, but the only thing on You Miao's mind was how Li Yan would've played with that Quanrong slave. Could men have fun like that, too? The idea of asking for the slave sprouted within him. You Miao wanted to have him for his own. He wanted to bring that guy back home so he could ask how he and Li Yan cocked around.

Up on the stage, the actors flowed in and out of the scene, their voices high in song. It took a full hour before You Miao broached the subject again.

“Hey, Li Yan. Lend your bro that Quanrong slave toy, yeah?”

“He’s pretty much dead,” said Li Yan. “I’ll take you to buy a new one in a few days.”

“And what if he’s not dead yet?” You Miao argued. “Didn’t you just say earlier that you weren’t gonna kill and bury him ‘til tomorrow morning?”

“Even if he’s not dead, it’s a no.”

“What’s the point of buying a new one? What a waste,” You Miao said. “I just wanna play around. I’ll give him back after I’m done, and you can beat him up or bury him or whatever you like.”

“No.”

“C’mon, just for a few days,” You Miao pleaded.

Li Yan was really annoyed now. “Are you freaking done?!”

The same jealous individual from earlier taunted again, “You-shaoye comes from a family of great wealth and business. You can easily buy hundreds of slaves, if not thousands, from the Royal Academy to fill your house. Why bother with tattered goods?”

You Miao’s request was only a casual one, but Li Yan became unwilling again after hearing the taunt.

“Him? He can’t afford it!”

“What do you mean, ‘I can’t afford it'?” demanded You Miao. “One night at Tingyu Pavilion only costs so much money—”

“It’s two hundred silver!” exclaimed Li Yan, cutting You Miao off. “Think you can afford it? If you can manage to whip out two hundred silver, I’ll give him to you.”

When the boys saw You Miao and Li Yan were bullshitting as usual, they all hooted, kicking up a ruckus.

“What, it’s just two hundred silver,” You Miao said. “Think I can’t pay it?”

Li Yan shot him a side-eyed look, thinking that he would've asked for a higher price had he known.

As for You Miao, while he might have spewed those words aloud, he thought to himself, *Well, shoot, I really* can't *afford it*. He only had three hundred silver left for the rest of the year, and it was even the amount he'd drawn in advance from next year. The talk was never meant to be anything serious, and he wasn't the one to bring up the subject of purchase either. But with that look Li Yan was giving him, You Miao suddenly felt indignant.

"You beat him half to death, so he's worth at most only one hundred silver," argued You Miao.

The crowd howled in laughter.

"Don't bargain if you can't afford him. Look at you, gotta backtrack so hard your dick's shriveled back into your balls." Li Yan mocked.

The provocation was too much. You Miao pulled out a wad of silver bills[14] from his robes and slapped it onto the table.

"Sold!"

This caught Li Yan off-guard. He was taken aback at first before he promptly flew into a rage.

"Did I *say* I was selling?!"

The crowd fell silent. You Miao really did have the money—all two hundred silver. In today's imperial capital, that money could buy an impressive mansion or over a hundred acres of good, fertile land. Even buying the freedom of the most renowned, headlining courtesan at Tingyu Pavilion would only cost a hundred and twenty silver. Two hundred silver for a male slave? It was unheard of!

Li Yan glared at You Miao like an angry bull.

At the sight of the situation souring, the band of wastrel elites quickly spoke up to smooth things over, for fear that the two were going to start fighting.

"Come now, there's no need to go this far. A male slave from the Royal Academy is a matter of five silver," said one.

“The birthday boy is the most important one today, he gets to call the shots,” said another.

You Miao had thrown down that wad of silver bills out of impulse, and he knew that there was no way he could take it back now. It’d look bad, and it was too late. Thus, it didn’t take long before he returned to his rascally, cheeky demeanor.

“What? Gonna miss him?” he teased with a wide grin.

“Take him home with you,” Li Yan spat bitterly. “I’d love to see where you’ll put him…that won’t get you knocked dead by your uncle. Spent two hundred silver on him, too. Sucker.”

You Miao couldn’t be bothered to retort. Seeing as the birthday banquet was about to end unhappily, another bystander took this chance to try and schmooze Li Yan. That killed You Miao’s desire to talk further, and the two sat in their seats, the air frozen between them.

You Miao left early without so much as a goodbye to Li Yan. As he exited the hall with his boy servants in tow, he saw that the gunny sack was sitting there in the snow with no signs of movement. The man might be dead.

He instantly began to panic—his two hundred silver couldn’t just go to waste like this!

“He’s not dead, is he?!” demanded You Miao. “If he’s dead, you all have to pay me back my two hundred silver! Genuine, pure silver! I bought him from your young master, yanno!”

Who among the bodyguards could afford that price? They all quivered in fright at the thought.

“Open the sack. Let me take a look!” You Miao ordered.

One of the braver bodyguards approached. He quickly explained as he untied the rope, “Please understand, You-gongzi, we lowly ones can’t be blamed for this. No one told us, so we didn’t know…”

“Never mind, forget it,” You Miao said. “Let’s see if he’s dead first. If he’s dead, then I don’t want him anymore. God. I’ll just…freaking go find

Li Yan to get my money back."

With a lantern held high, the bodyguard untied the sack and slowly pulled it off the man inside. The head was the first thing to be revealed. The man had been beaten so badly that he was bleeding from every orifice. Yet his body was muscled and toned, and his arms and legs were long. As the sack was fully peeled off, they could see that the blood on the man's lower body had already dried to a purplish-black, and that he was smeared with urine and feces—the earlier violence he'd suffered had caused him to lose control of his bladder and bowels.

"Is he dead?" You Miao asked as one of his boy servants bent down to check if the man was breathing.

Then it struck You Miao—Li Yan said he'd sell him the man, but he never said whether the man would be alive or dead. If You Miao tried to fight for a refund and Li Yan made fun of him for it, then the two hundred silver was as good as gone. You Miao would have to swallow the deal whether the man was alive or dead.

This was some tricky business… You Miao huffed a heated breath then knelt on one knee to press his ear to the man's chest in an attempt to listen for his heartbeat. The body was still a bit warm and not yet stiff.

The man was alive.

"Go get some help. Use the cushion seat cover in the horse carriage to wrap him, then take him home," You Miao ordered. "What's his name?"

One of the bodyguards quickly supplied an answer when he saw You Miao wasn't going to give them more trouble. "His name is Li Zhifeng. A Quanrong slave."

You Miao motioned for their departure, and the boy servants escorted him out.

You Miao's uncle was throwing a fit at home the day he brought back the Quanrong slave named Li Zhifeng. Not daring to raise a fanfare lest he alert people, You Miao ordered the boy servants to roughly pad the space behind the screen in his room with some blankets like a doghouse, then leave the

man there. He warned them that they were not to say anything, then he retired to his room and pretended nothing had happened.

Snow fell heavily that night. As You Miao lay there on his bed, he remembered the stray dog he had once brought home. Halfway through the night, he couldn't help but sit up to check and see if the Quanrong slave had died.

Around midnight, heavy gasping like that of bellowing wind came from behind the screen. You Miao couldn't sleep, so he quietly got up. Dressed in a robe whiter than snow, he walked in bare feet across the cashmere rug carrying a small, rainbow-colored glass lamp. Without calling for the maid outside the door, he peered behind the screen.

The Quanrong slave's panting breaths were broken; he gasped and heaved with great difficulty, sounding very much like he was on the verge of death. You Miao thought back on his two hundred silver, and it made his heart clench. Peeling back the cotton blanket, he used the glow from the glass lamp to carefully check the man.

Earlier in the winter snow, this man had been freezing to the point that his body was turning purple; the blood, urine, sweat, and stomach acid from dry heaving were all mixed together, and much of it had frozen into ice. Now that he had been smothered under the blankets for half the night, the fluids had melted and emitted a sour, astringent stench. You Miao continued to look. The man's arms and legs were well-proportioned. His feet were big, his fingers were long, and judging by sight, he was more than six feet in height. His long legs looked as powerful as those of wild horses, and he was hung like a stallion. He was gorgeous.

When You Miao's gaze traveled to the man's face, the open eyes gave him a start, and it almost made him drop the lamp over his face.

The man stared unblinkingly at the glass lamp with lifeless eyes. "Why did you save me?" he asked, his voice low and raspy.

"You're…still alive?" You Miao asked tentatively.

When he received no reply, You Miao thought, *How do I even answer a question like that?* He couldn't possibly tell him it was because he wanted

to hear how the Quanrong slave and Li Yan got on with that naughty business.

"It was on a whim," he said instead. "Are you…okay?"

The lamp in You Miao's hand swayed over the man's face. The man's gaze finally fell on You Miao. The colors of the glass lamp glowed and glimmered through the screen. The brilliant shades turned and swirled, illuminating both of their expressions.

"You cost me two hundred silver, you know," You Miao said. "You can't die. What's your name?"

The man stared at You Miao, his eyes unblinking. It was a long time before he answered, "Li Zhifeng."

With the name confirmed, You Miao then added, "I also offended Li Yan for your sake. So, you best be smart about things. I'll call a doctor for you tomorrow. Just rest for now."

Li Zhifeng didn't respond, so You Miao hung the glass lamp next to the screen and went back to his own bed. You Miao spent the entire night worrying over the death of his two hundred silver. Every so often, he'd get up to peer over the screen, keeping his ears keen. This went on until daybreak, when he snuck over for the last time. Seeing that Li Zhifeng's eyes were closed, You Miao reached out to check under his nose for his breath.

"I won't die," Li Zhifeng spoke up. "You can relax and go to sleep."

You Miao nodded. As he trekked back to bed, he heard Li Zhifeng add, "I will never forget that you saved my life."

You Miao grinned in response. "As long as you don't die, you'll be doing me a favor," he said.

This time, You Miao slept soundly. After an entire night of turmoil, he didn't wake until noon.

When the maids entered the room, their noses twitched. One of them asked, "Shaoye, what is that smell?"

“Get out, get out! It’s none of your business,” You Miao exclaimed quickly. As he shooed the maids out, something occurred to him, and he said, “Bring the incense burner in here.”

The maids were baffled.

You Miao then asked, “Where’s my uncle?”

A maid curtsied and replied, “The master has gone to visit the Minister of Revenue.”

While You Miao was washing up, a boy servant came knocking. He reported, “Qiao-er is waiting outside the second gate and has Shaoye’s study bag all ready.”

As if You Miao had any mind for school right now. He quickly responded, “I’m not going today. You can all go and take a break.”

Every day, the boy servants prepared a study companion for You Miao; the book boys had been hired from home.[15] Every day, everyone would put up appearances since no one was checking homework. Every day, everyone was happily relaxed and free.

After You Miao finished washing up, the incense burner was hauled into the room. It was stuffed full of fuming incense sticks. Breakfast was also delivered, but on top of what had already been served, You Miao ordered some congee and had the maids shred some fried partridge in it. Then he ordered everyone to leave the room while he snuck an extra empty bowl.

“I want to take a bath,” You Miao said. “Go prepare the water, then call Shiqi-er in.”

A moment later, the boy servant named Shiqi-er came in, hauling a large vat of water. Shiqi was a personal attendant sent from his own home who often waited on You Miao.

“Shaoye, you hid that dead dog from last night in your room?” he asked as soon as he entered, sounding surprised. He knew about You Miao’s purchase of the useless man from the night before.

“What dead dog?” You Miao snapped. “He’s two hundred silver. Get over here and give me a hand.”

You Miao didn't dare allow his uncle to learn about this affair. He was scared that if his uncle set eyes on Li Zhifeng, he'd throw him out the door in an instant and give You Miao a beating. You Miao would need to tend to Li Zhifeng's wounds before he told his uncle that he was a slave servant that someone else had given him, and in order to heal his wounds, they would need to call a doctor. In order to call a doctor, they would need to clean him up first.

Shiqi stood there with his sleeves held up, peering behind the screen with You Miao.

"What are you looking at?" You Miao demanded. "Go hold him upright."

Shiqi's face twitched—the man really was too smelly. However, no matter how unwilling he was, he had no choice but to help You Miao pull the man upright. Li Zhifeng staggered from the action, unsteady on his feet.

"Can you walk on your own?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng nodded even though his feet were weak, so You Miao and Shiqi held and brought him to the bathtub before they pushed him in headfirst. The resulting splash drenched the two from head to toe. Shiqi looked miserable.

"Go find him a set of clean clothes," ordered You Miao before he flipped Li Zhifeng over.

Having no energy at all, Li Zhifeng leaned against the side of the bathtub with his eyes closed. You Miao picked up a loofah stick and attempted a scrub-down. He swept Li Zhifeng's hair up to lay it behind his head, then stared at his face.

"Pretty handsome," You Miao commented. "You all right?"

Li Zhifeng seemed to use all of his strength to raise a hand from the water. With it trembling still, he rested it over You Miao's hand that was gripping the side of the tub.

"How come a man your size can't even win against some bodyguards?" You Miao grumbled.

"They fed me muscle paralysis powder,[16]" Li Zhifeng said.

His voice was very small and very weak. You Miao shuffled close to his lips, not having heard him properly.

"What?"

"Martial arts," Li Zhifeng replied, his voice forced out in a harsh huff.

"You know martial arts?" You Miao was amazed.

He wanted to ask more questions, but Li Zhifeng couldn't speak. Seeing how he was barely hanging on to dear life, You Miao could only leave him be for the time being.

Shiqi came in with the clothes. You Miao first rested the dripping Li Zhifeng on his own bed, then dressed him in the undershirt and underpants before wrapping him in a cloth robe. The two then rolled him in the soft mattress and moved him behind the screen. Shiqi rolled up the blankets from before and went out to toss them. You Miao heaved a sigh—everything was done at last.

Li Zhifeng's hair was still damp, but at least some color had returned to his gaunt, slightly darker-toned face. His cheekbones were very high, and over his brow bone was a scar that hadn't completely healed—most likely from Li Yan beating him with a vase during their altercation. The scar was at least two inches long, and dragged from his brow bone all the way to his ear. A perfectly good, handsome man like this…ruined by a scar.

His eyes were shut. His thick, blade-like eyebrows were beautiful, and his nose ridge was high. His fingers were long and slender. However, his face was as sallow as a corpse's.

You Miao called to him again, "Hey."

Li Zhifeng opened his eyes weakly; his eyes were laced with a little bit of blue. He moved his lips, but no words came out. You Miao lifted a piece of jade from around his neck, then leaned down to tie the pendant around Li Zhifeng's neck.

"This is the life-protection charm my mom gave me," You Miao said. "I'll lend it to you for now. Get up and come eat something."

You Miao placed the bowl of congee in a hot water basin to keep it warm, then fumbled out a small jade spoon. Once Shiqi came back, the two held Li Zhifeng to sit him upright. You Miao was fifteen this year, and Shiqi was only fourteen—for two half-adults to arrange a full-grown man like this was taxing, to say the least. It was with great difficulty that they managed to feed him the entire bowl of hot congee.

After the meal, You Miao sent Shiqi to call for a doctor. It would seem You Miao wouldn't be able to leave the house again today, so he figured he'd just sit around in his room and flip through his books or be idle.

Behind the screen, Li Zhifeng suddenly started coughing. You Miao hurried over to check on him. Blood had finally returned to Li Zhifeng's face after eating the congee. His skin wasn't as delicate as You Miao's, and was deeper in hue. He turned to the side to cough, and veins bulged on the back of his hand as he firmly covered his mouth.

You Miao rubbed his back, watching him with concern. When the doctor came, if he declared Li Zhifeng couldn't be healed, then…guess he should throw him out, You Miao thought. But with all that wind and snow blowing outside, he couldn't just ditch a full-grown man out on the block like that. He had to throw him farther away. That'd be a little sad. Two hundred silver… Had he known, he wouldn't have spent it. The very thought of it was giving You Miao heartburn. He quietly reminded himself that if he was to throw Li Zhifeng out, he had to be sure to take back his mom's jade pendant, lest it get tossed with the man.

"How old are you?" You Miao asked sympathetically.

"Eleventh year of Qing Shuo,[17]" answered Li Zhifeng.

You Miao nodded. The current year was the Thirty-Third Year of Qing Shuo, which meant Li Zhifeng was twenty-two.

You Miao went back to his desk and sat down, putting his hands around the hand warmer.[18] After a moment of thought, however, he shuffled back over to place the warmer in Li Zhifeng's hands before sitting next to the ground bedding behind the screen.

"When were you sold to the capital?" You Miao asked.

“Seven years ago,” Li Zhifeng replied.

Sold to the Royal Academy at the age of fifteen. You Miao only had a vague idea of what kind of place it was. When aristocratic families were seized and their properties confiscated, oftentimes the women would be sold to the Royal Academy to become government prostitutes. There were quite a number of men in the institution as well. Something like a Quanrong slave, though… This was the first time You Miao had heard of it, so he had no idea what this guy’s background was even like. Judging by his appearance, he certainly didn’t look like a working boy.

“Shaoye,” Shiqi’s voice rang from outside.

You Miao immediately got to his feet and went out to usher in the old doctor who stood outside the door, holding his medicine bag and covered in snow. As the doctor worked on Li Zhifeng, You Miao watched on with worry…except Shiqi kept distracting him by tossing him looks. You Miao arched his eyebrow in response. *What?*

“The master is back,” Shiqi whispered.

You Miao’s mind turned. “Has he called for me?”

When Shiqi shook his head, You Miao said, “Then leave it for now.”

The doctor didn’t question Li Zhifeng’s background, or why there was a man housed in Young Master You’s bedroom. He only focused on the diagnosis with deeply furrowed brows.

Shiqi turned to Li Zhifeng and said, “My young master called for the best doctor of the entire capital for a waste-of-money like you. Ten whole silver, I tell you.”

Wh…what?! It was as if You Miao was stricken by a bolt from the blue. Glaring at Shiqi, he hissed through gritted teeth by his ear, “You called for such an expensive doctor?!”

“Shaoye, use your head,” Shiqi reasoned. “The waste-of-money is worth two hundred silver. If he could be healed with ten silver, wouldn’t it be worth it?”

You Miao was nearly out of money, but despite burning with anger, he had to acquiesce. “Fine, fine.”

“The master has returned—!”

“Laoye!”

As the storm outside intensified, the blowing snow was like knives hailing from above. A horse-drawn carriage parked outside the main entrance of the You residence, then Master You was carried via sedan to the second yard of the four-yard siheyuan. The sedan rocked as it came to a stop outside the main hall. You Deyou shivered when he peeled back the curtain. He hollered a few times, and the sedan carriers heeded and moved forward a bit more, crossing through the doors and into the hall. Only then did You Deyou wobble down from the sedan.

You Deyou was a large, middle-aged man. After he settled in the imperial capital, he focused his businesses on the six main highways of the Jiangnan region. With his finger on the pulse of the imperial court, he often ran communications for the You family. His wealth allowed him to spend his days gorging himself on gourmet food, which was how he had eaten himself to his current pudgy state. Because of his size, he was exhausted before he had even entered the main hall.

His little concubine hurried over to serve him; she handed him a hot towel and started the brazier. Only then did he feel better.

“Where’s You Miao?” he asked as he wiped his hands.

Despite how much of a handful his nephew was, You Deyou still had to look after him. The first reason was that You Miao was the eldest principal son of You Dechuan’s branch of the family, which at the end of the day, made his status extraordinary. The second reason was the You family would ultimately need someone to look after it—and it was obvious by You Dechuan’s intent that he’d planned on having his son become a government official. You Miao couldn’t be neglected or ignored, so You Deyou usually closed one eye when it came to him screwing around.

“The young master nephew is at home,” replied the butler. “Does laoye want to summon him?”

You Deyou went bug-eyed when he heard this, and mumbled to himself, “Did the sun rise from the west? That boy is at home and behaving in the middle of the day?”

The little concubine explained with a smile as she massaged You Deyou’s shoulders, “Might be because it’s snowing so heavily today that he doesn’t have anywhere to go?”

“Whatever, whatever, call him over,” You Deyou said. “Have the kitchen whip up something and get lunch over and done with first.”

Meanwhile, You Miao was still staring at the doctor, feeling rather anxious. The doctor’s eyes were squinted, and he hadn’t spoken a single word for an entire incense time—it was like he had entered deep meditation. Just then, the butler’s voice rang from the outside.

“Shaoye, the master is requesting you. He wishes to speak with you and have lunch.”

You Miao had no choice but to go. Still worried as he was leaving, he took out money—ten silver for the service and some broken silver for tips—and gave it to Shiqi. He then whispered in Shiqi’s ear, instructing him to watch over things, before he hurried off to see You Deyou.

You Deyou didn’t say much, however, when You Miao arrived. He only asked how You Miao’s studies were going, who he was typically hanging out with, and other such things. You Miao couldn’t eat much—he had that extra person in his room on his mind, and had only just had breakfast. Not long after lunch, he tried to rush back to his room, saying he was going to go read.

You Deyou was even more astonished now. Thinking his nephew had undergone a personality change, he called out, “Stop right there!”

“What?” You Miao responded tersely.

“I wanted to ask you… Last month, the palace sent someone over with word…” he trailed off.

“The Third Prince wants me to be his study companion?” You Miao said quickly, having recalled the matter.

You Deyou scoffed and asked, “Are you going to go?” When You Miao hesitated, he then started to lecture. “I’m not telling you what to do, but why are you so stupid? I know the Third Prince isn’t a bad person. But at the end of the day, he’s still not the crown prince…”

You Miao had fallen out with Li Yan over the whole Quanrong slave business, so the thought of picking sides now made him a little uneasy. The young wastrels of the capital might be young, but were their families ignorant simpletons? Of course not. And naturally, the boys were influenced by what they saw and heard at home and knew about the political factions and the fight for the throne. Each of them had long since picked their team in the game—and they would follow Li Yan to the end.

But truth be told, it wouldn’t actually be that bad to follow the Third Prince. When the Crown Prince ascended the throne in the future, if the remaining affection he had for his own blood stayed his hand in eliminating his brother and his faction, then the Third Prince would be granted a formal Prince title. If You Miao joined the Third Prince now, he could join him in his wealth later when he was conferred the honors.

You Miao never really had any ambitions. It was enough as long as there was a peaceful and stable place he could stay. If he could decide for himself, then he might as well side with the Third Prince. As long as the *third bro* didn’t conspire to rebel, and if he wasn’t wary of his elder brother, then there would hardly be any fewer riches in that life compared to becoming a government official. Nonetheless, You Miao also knew that his dad was hoping he’d land a position—so what could he do, huh?

You Miao smiled and said, “I never wanted to enter the palace in the first place.”

You Deyou nodded approvingly. “As long as you get it,” he said. “I already declined him for you.”

Sigh. No man was free to act as he willed inside the capital. You Miao was just about to head out when another messenger arrived.

“Shaoye, the Chancellor’s young master has sent for this to be delivered.”

You Deyou's beard flicked a little, and his eyebrows twitched. You Miao took the delivered item and saw that it was a piece of leather with writing on it. It was Li Zhifeng's slave deed.

"What's that?" You Deyou asked.

"Nothin'," You Miao said. Then he reiterated, "It's nothing."

He tucked the slave deed into his breast pocket, threw a *heh-heh* at his uncle, and hurried away.

CHAPTER 2

"How is he?" You Miao asked as soon as he returned to his room.

"The doctor said it's nothing critical," Shiqi replied. "Only flesh wounds. He told us to get a Heavenly King Life-Preservation Pill[19] for several of his internal injuries. He also has a lingering cold that's never gotten better, so the doctor's worried it might've hurt his lungs. The doctor said to call him again if he doesn't get better after a while even with the prescription."

After You Miao nodded, Shiqi added, "But the Heavenly King Life-Preservation Pill isn't cheap. It also costs ten silver…"

You Miao couldn't stop himself from wincing, but he'd already spent two hundred silver—what was another ten more? He took out the money and handed it over.

"Go. Buy it," he said.

Shiqi brought the prescribed medication back that very afternoon. You Miao first fed Li Zhifeng the life-preservation pill, then took a crockpot and sat in the room to decoct the medicinal herbs. As the pot simmered, You Miao suddenly stopped. Wait. He was the high and mighty young master—how come *he* became the one waiting on a slave?!

"Ugh." You Miao groaned, feeling a little depressed. "I've got it hard this time, all for you. You waste of money. Hurry and take your meds and get better, yeah? Then you can do something afterward."

The color of Li Zhifeng's complexion looked better after taking the Heavenly King Life-Preservation Pill, but he only continued to stare at You Miao.

"This is messed up. How come *I'm* the one serving you?" You Miao griped. "Just drink this."

You Miao passed him the bowl of medicine. He didn't bother to clean up afterward, though, and went to play dead in bed instead. After an entire day of toil, he was thoroughly exhausted.

That night, Li Zhifeng's appetite improved and he was able to hold down the thick chicken congee. All You Miao wanted was for him to recover faster, so he had the kitchen stew a massive bowl's worth. He also got Shiqi to buy some ginseng, some ganoderma, and other such herbal supplements—anything that could help Li Zhifeng was fed to him to prevent him from lying around more than necessary. Before bed, You Miao stewed another large bowl of thick ginseng broth to dunk into the man, and it was only after that You Miao finally retired.

There was some noise in the middle of the night, and You Miao snapped awake at once. At first, he thought there was a thief who had gotten in. When he looked up, however, he recognized the figure in the room as Li Zhifeng.

He couldn't be thinking of stealing something and then running away? You Miao wondered, not daring to move. Borrowing the light from outside the window, he could see better—and found that Li Zhifeng was cleaning up the medicine and food bowls and putting the hand warmer away. When he reached the desk to tidy it, he paused, seeming to have seen his own slave deed. However, he placed it aside and continued on like it didn't concern him.

The next day, because of that incident with Li Yan, no one came to look for You Miao to hang out. There was no way You Miao would saunter over himself, so he hung around the house bored out of his mind. Sometimes he'd go over to check if Li Zhifeng was better, and sometimes he'd chat him up. Li Zhifeng's words were sparse; he was like a log. However, You Miao was very curious about his background and bombarded him with questions.

"What's Quanrong?" You Miao asked.

"A people," Li Zhifeng replied.

"How did you end up getting sold to the capital?" You Miao asked.

“Lost a battle,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Do you want to go home?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head.

“So, what did you do at the Royal Academy?”

At that question, Li Zhifeng only stared at You Miao, not speaking a word.

The medicine pot started to boil, so You Miao said, “Go drink it up.”

Li Zhifeng silently heeded and went to drink the decoction without a word.

“Hey, Quanrong slave,” You Miao called. “How are you going to repay me?”

“From now on, I’ll do whatever you tell me to,” Li Zhifeng answered. “If you order me to live, then I shall live; if you order me to die, then I shall die.”

You Miao was a little moved by this. He never thought this guy knew how to say such long sentences. Nonetheless, he couldn’t think of any orders at the moment to issue him.

“Can you work? Do you know how to serve? Do you know how to coiffe hair?” You Miao asked. Then he added, after Li Zhifeng nodded to the questions, “Do you know how to do laundry, cooking, cleaning, and other menial labor?”

Li Zhifeng gave a slight nod. His eyes focused on the bowl of medicine.

“Know how to fight?” You Miao asked.

“A little,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“What else can you do?”

Li Zhifeng took a gulp of the decoction and answered, “Bed warming.”

It came back to You Miao now. He asked, “Did you sleep with Li Yan?”

Li Zhifeng shook his head. After a moment’s thought, You Miao said, “Why don’t you serve me, then, once you’re all better? If you do a good

job, I'll free you in a few years and let you go home."

You Miao had no idea how men had fun in bed, but judging by the state of Li Zhifeng, the man was barely half the shape You Miao was in. They couldn't fool around right now; it'd be torturing him. You Miao wouldn't be getting his money's worth if Li Zhifeng died.

"Do you know the role of a study companion?" asked You Miao, after he sat at the desk. "Come here and grind some ink for me."

Li Zhifeng drank the rest of the medicine and came over to do as he was told. With one easy sweep of his robe, he knelt on one knee next to You Miao's desk; a one-step motion done with immense grace. He then rolled up his sleeves and ground ink upon the inkstone with the inkstick held between his lean, defined fingers. You Miao stole a glimpse at him. This man was different from all the other boy servants—he possessed an indescribable class.

"Do you know how to read?" You Miao started his questions again.

Li Zhifeng nodded.

There were slaves that could read? You Miao was astonished.

Once the ink was ground, Li Zhifeng rose to his feet to tidy things again. He returned a moment later and sat down, kneeling next to You Miao. He raised a fist to his nose force down a few coughs. As for You Miao, he only wrote a few random lines before he started to doodle on the paper; he couldn't concentrate on studying and was bored out of his mind. As he sprawled over his desk, his mind was instead on the affair with Li Yan. Being at home was rather dull, but after offending Li Yan, You Miao couldn't really go over and seek his contempt.

And the more troublesome thing was that his money was almost gone. It hadn't even been three months since he received that sum of five hundred silver. He had to think of a way to ask for more money from home.

You Miao side-eyed the main culprit who caused him to lose money and saw Li Zhifeng was looking at what he'd doodled on the paper with an impassive expression. When he sensed You Miao's eyes on him, he turned and met his gaze.

It wasn't just Li Zhifeng's ink-grinding posture that was unusual—even the way he was kneeling was weird. Everyone else either knelt or sat simply, whereas Li Zhifeng had both hands resting on his knees and his back was as straight as a brush. Much like a soldier in the military, there was a hint of killing intent about him.

"Come." You Miao waved him over.

Li Zhifeng got up and approached in two easy steps, then bowed and knelt to sit once more. Even when he was simply kneeling like this, he was still a head taller than You Miao, and regarded him with his head hung. You Miao kept thinking there was something indescribable in those eyes.

With his right hand still holding the brush, You Miao reached out with his left to peel open Li Zhifeng's collar and fished out the jade pendant.

"I knew this protection charm would be effective," You Miao said. "My mom left it for me. See? You recovered from your half-dead state in two days."

Li Zhifeng didn't respond.

"How do men do *that* together?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng still didn't answer, so You Miao urged, "C'mon. Speak."

He finally understood why Li Yan had beaten this guy up. If You Miao himself had made the original purchase and got a man who acted like he was all that and did not respond to commands, You Miao might've wanted to beat him up too. Fortunately, he had already anticipated this, so he didn't mind as much.

"It's hard to explain," Li Zhifeng finally said.

"Then why don't you accompany me in bed some other day?" You Miao asked. "Teach me how to play. I've never done something like that with men before. Now that I've spent two hundred silver buying you, it seems such a waste just to have you serve beverages."

Li Zhifeng nodded, and the two stared at each other for a moment. All You Miao could think was this guy was genuinely too dull.

"Turn over a bit."

You Miao gestured for him to turn. He was tired of sitting and was just looking for something to lean on, so he leaned into Li Zhifeng's arms while he continued to flip lazily through his book. He could hear Li Zhifeng's chest heaving. Maybe he had asthma. After an entire afternoon like that, You Miao gradually fell asleep. And yet Li Zhifeng didn't move a muscle, sitting upright like a block of wood for him to lean on. When You Miao roused around dusk and got up, Li Zhifeng staggered—his legs had obviously fallen asleep. You Miao laughed heartily at him and told him to go decoct his own medicine.

Many days passed thus. Every morning when You Miao rose, Li Zhifeng was there to wait on him. He helped him dress, brushed his hair, and fastened his hat. Every time he knelt to fix the hems of You Miao's robes, it would always be on one knee, displaying zero sign of inferiority or meek obedience. Gradually, You Miao began to think every move and every action this slave made gave off an inexplicable sense of carefree grace.

After taking the two prescribed medications, it took less than ten days for Li Zhifeng's health to recover; he just never left the house. In those ten days, You Miao had also sent all the servants of his chamber away and had Li Zhifeng be the sole one serving him. Unexpectedly, not only was Li Zhifeng willing to do the work, the two seemed to share an excellent tacit understanding.

The second a thought struck You Miao, it would be as though Li Zhifeng could read his mind. He would come over with a cup and place it on his desk. After writing a bit, Li Zhifeng would bring a towel to wipe his hands. You Miao would stretch, and Li Zhifeng would come put away the brush and take the inkstone to wash. It went on like this for days in a row, and You Miao discovered that this guy was fairly easy to use.

Aside from serving him in bed, which had yet to be tried, Li Zhifeng could take care of everything else without needing to be ordered. The only downside was that he was too quiet. Sometimes when You Miao was at home studying, Li Zhifeng would gaze out the door, hugging one knee. Who knew what he was looking at, but he could gaze for an entire afternoon—except for when he detected movement from You Miao, in which case he would turn his head and get up to go over.

Of all the servants You Miao had ever commanded, he felt it the most comfortable to use Li Zhifeng. All in all, You Miao concluded that it was because Li Zhifeng treated him and his affairs with care. The other servants would try to slack off whenever they could, whereas Li Zhifeng was filled with gratitude because You Miao had saved his life. Li Zhifeng knew to repay him for his kindness.

Very good. Excellent.

You Miao was so very pleased with Li Zhifeng that he even sent Shiqi away, leaving only Li Zhifeng to wait on him. A few more layers of bedding were added to the small area behind the screen where Li Zhifeng slept, and it now resembled a den built with blankets. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng was like a dog who came and went at You Miao's beck and call. No…calling him a dog wasn't quite right, either. You Miao didn't even need to call him; he only needed to *notice* him. When the two met eyes, Li Zhifeng could tell whether he was needed or if You Miao had simply dropped a casual glance at him.

It was simply too comfortable to be with Li Zhifeng, but his words were also genuinely too little. If he could talk more and have casual conversations, then he'd be perfect.

Nearly half a month had passed since You Miao left the house at this point. He'd been staying put at home studying with the plan of catching up on all the homework he'd deserted. You Deyou had come by a few times to check up on him, and every time You Miao sensed such a disturbance, he'd order Li Zhifeng to hide behind the screen.

You Deyou thought his nephew had a change of heart, but only You Miao himself knew it best deep down—he was out of money. He had barely sixty silver left, and that was all he had at his disposal until the next time he asked his dad for money. It'd only been three months since he'd last asked; after New Year's was over, he would have to think of a way to coax his dad for some more allowance.

Yet just when You Miao was stifled so much indoors that a bird was going to hatch, Li Yan showed up at his door.

"You Miao!" Li Yan called out from the yard.

Without a care of whether You Miao was home, he swaggered inside with a book boy in tow. You Miao fixed his robes before going out to greet him. It just so happened that You Deyou wasn't home that day, so his little concubine Yanhong was peeping around the corner, trying to sneak looks. It was bright and clear on this wintry day, but it was a strange thing regardless for Li Yan to come knocking. You Miao was a little flattered by the show of favor.

"What's going on?" You Miao asked.

Li Yan went up and gave him a shove. "I should be the one asking you that. What are you doing, hiding out at home all day?"

"I'm studying," You Miao replied with a *heh-heh* laugh.

Li Yan scoffed. "Yeah, right. Your family is so rich, but I've never seen you study. What are you reading at this time of the day?"

You Miao knew that this was Li Yan dropping his young master act to come and apologize, so he warmly put his arm around his shoulder as the two bros headed to the inner courtyard.

"Not gonna lie, but my old man is about to throw a fit over me spending money without studying," You Miao said with a laugh. "He's gonna cut my purse strings if I don't start hitting the books."

Like something had occurred to him, Li Yan took out that wad of two hundred silver bills from his breast pocket.

"Here. You can have this back," Li Yan said, tossing the bundle to You Miao.

Now You Miao was truly touched. He knew it wouldn't be good of him to take it, though, so he quickly refused, "No, no. The business was done and the transaction complete. How can I take that?"

"If I give it to you, then just take it!" exclaimed Li Yan, who yanked You Miao by the collar and pushed him toward the chambers.

"My family does business for a living. We never take return payments!" You Miao protested.

"Trying to get yelled at some more, are you?" Li Yan spat.

“The man came back from the brink of death, so just take it as if I really did buy him from you…”

Li Yan and You Miao pushed back and forth, and Li Yan felt the urge to pin You Miao under him and to fondle and rub wherever he pleased. The door suddenly opened and You Miao felt his back bump against someone else. When he turned his head, he realized it was Li Zhifeng.

Li Yan’s face darkened immediately at the sight of him. Li Zhifeng pulled You Miao behind him without a word, but his lips moved, looking as if he wanted to say something. You Miao had been wholly enjoying how easy it was to order this man around, and was scared Li Yan was going to ask for him back in order to kill him.

You Miao quickly said, “Since I bought him, he’s mine now, yeah?”

This angered Li Yan, however. “Insolence!” he yelled at Li Zhifeng. “You’re nothing but a dog! Kneel right this instant!”

Li Zhifeng remained unmoved. When You Miao saw how upset Li Yan was getting, he quickly ordered, “Kneel, kneel. Li Zhifeng, on your knees.”

Without hesitation, Li Zhifeng bent to the ground, resting his left hand on one knee while the right dropped to the ground balled into a fist. He bowed slightly toward You Miao.

You Miao grinned and said with a laugh, “How about this?”

He took the wad of two hundred silver in Li Yan’s hand, took a hundred’s worth, then stuffed the other hundred in Li Yan’s hands.

“His surname is Li. Was it you who gave him that name?” he asked.

Li Yan snorted in reply.

“Well, I’ll leave the name unchanged,” You Miao said. “As for this Quanrong slave, let’s just say you gave him to me as a present. And this bit of money? It’s me treating you to drinks, that okay?”

“He’s your slave now,” Li Yan said. “Are you gonna let me beat him or nah?”

“Of course you can,” You Miao said agreeably. “Beat him all you want.”

Li Yan swung his leg and knocked Li Zhifeng down with a kick. He then picked up a vase and smashed it over his head. Amidst the resounding sound of broken porcelain, the vase shattered to pieces all over the ground. Blood seeped from Li Zhifeng's forehead. He staggered for a moment before returning to a proper kneeling position.

With his hands tucked in his sleeves, You Miao's face twitched as he watched the violence.

"Piece of crap," Li Yan spat. "You got off easy."

"Good. You good now?" You Miao asked.

"I'll give you some face and let it go this time," Li Yan said.

You Miao had no idea what grievance Li Yan had with this Quanrong slave, but now that the air was cleared, Li Yan wouldn't be able to give him trouble in the future. That meant You Miao could bring Li Zhifeng out next time.

Li Yan turned around and moved toward the yard. You Miao rejoiced inwardly; the case was technically closed now, and things had been talked out with Li Yan.

"Where are we going to have fun today?" You Miao asked.

"That brat Lin just got a good horse from the Western Territories. Let's go check it out. Come," Li Yan said.

Li Zhifeng was left still kneeling inside the room, moving not a muscle. All the while, You Miao and Li Yan crossed through the corridors and left, their arms over each other's shoulders.

Once the boys left, the little concubine Yanhong emerged from behind the corridor pillar. She curiously peered into You Miao's room and saw Li Zhifeng with a head covered in blood and kneeling on one knee as he cleaned up the broken pieces of the shattered vase.

"You're one of Young Master You's people?" Yanhong asked. "How come I've never seen you before?"

Li Zhifeng looked up and glanced at her.

Yanhong then asked, “You’re a mute?”

That day, You Miao and Li Yan visited the abode of the Vice Minister of Rites. They laughed and chatted and checked out the new little horse their wastrel friend had gotten. You Miao didn’t know how to ride a horse, and Li Yan said he would teach him. However, just as they were about to go out of the city to ride together, a boy servant from the You residence came to deliver a message that ordered him to return at once.

You Miao deflated immediately, but still had to temporarily wave goodbye to his band of buddies to go home. The moment he entered the residence, he saw Li Zhifeng kneeling in the middle of the main hall, and his slave deed on the table. You Deyou lay in his chair, so angry he was like a quaking mountain of meat. You Miao immediately understood the situation.

“This man…” You Miao started, “...is someone a friend gave me. He’s a slave.”

“Is a slave something you can just take?!” You Deyou scolded. “And you think he’s a regular slave? This one’s extremely hard to keep! You don’t know anything! Send him away at once! Send him away, this instant. Don’t stir up trouble!”

You Miao’s heart stopped for a second. He looked at Li Zhifeng and asked, “Did you cause trouble?”

Li Zhifeng didn’t nod or shake his head.

You Miao laughed with a *heh-heh* and said, “Shu,[20] just let me keep him. This guy is more worry-free than Shiqi-er, you know.”

“*Not possible!*” You Deyou shouted, his roar as booming as crashing thunder.

Sitting next to You Deyou was his wife, and she jumped in surprise at the sudden yell, spilling tea all over herself.

“Calm down, laoye, don’t be angry….” she quickly soothed. “Miao-er, that isn’t just any regular slave. He’s a Quanrong! We can’t keep a Quanrong slave in our household—it’ll spell trouble!”

“Quanrong?” You Miao didn’t quite understand. What was wrong with the Quanrong?

“Miao-zi, oh Miao-zi,” You Deyou scolded bitterly, “you don’t know just how much the government despises the Quanrong! One year when I went beyond the Great Wall to transport a shipment of goods, we Han and the Quanrong started fighting. Men fell like wheat under the scythe. The Quanrong raped our Han women, set fires to our Han houses, and stabbed our children dead. They’ve done every evil deed possible!”

“Oh,” You Miao said.

“...”

Everyone was rendered speechless by You Miao’s dispassionate response.

Shaking in rage, You Deyou pointed at the kneeling Li Zhifeng and yelled, “If we capture any Quanrong beyond the Great Wall, there should be no holding back—we must peel their skins and pull their tendons! And yet you dare bring this wolf back home! Aren’t you even scared that—”

“But isn’t everything laid out on the slave deed?” You Miao said, cutting You Deyou off. “Here, Shu. See? This man was fed that whatchamacallit pill, so he’s no different from us—”

“Nope! Nope! You don’t understand! Send him away this instant! I mean it! *Right now*!” You Deyou screamed, and dust from the ceiling fell from the shockwaves of his hysterical voice.

You Miao tried to laugh this off with his continuous little *heh-heh*s, but that only enraged You Deyou further.

“Laugh! What are you laughing about?!” he rebuked.

“But he was punished already,” You Miao tried to explain. “Li Yan beat him half to death a while ago. In any case, I’ve only just saved him from the brink of death. So for the man himself, plus the cost of seeing the doctor, he’s cost me two hundred and fifty silver…”

His confession had everyone in the room roll their eyes all the way back into their heads. You Deyou slumped in his chair like a pig, his eyes

bugging out. The madam was so shaken she collapsed and slipped off her seat. The little concubine eavesdropping outside fainted with a "Eep."

Two hundred and fifty silver?! The expenses of the You residence, including grants to servants, was only eighty silver a year!

You Miao added, "You wouldn't be able to make back two hundred and fifty silver even if you cut him up and sell him by the pound. Wouldn't you say, Shu?"

You Deyou couldn't even speak anymore. "You, you, you… Very good. I'm going to write to your dad. We'll see how he disciplines you…you little beast!"

"Don't be angry, Shu," You Miao quickly said. "And besides, the Chancellor's young master is the one who sold him to me—"

"Even if the crown prince had been the one to sell him, you still can't take him!" You Deyou exclaimed. "Send him away immediately! I'm going to write to your dad right now…"

You Miao had never imagined housing a Quanrong person would be this difficult of an issue. Anything that got roped into state feuds would no longer be a simple matter. Any basic books of wisdom speak of the principle that "people of different races cannot be trusted," but when You Miao gazed at the kneeling Li Zhifeng, an odd wave of emotions surged in him.

It wasn't so much that he couldn't bear to throw Li Zhifeng away, but at the very least, he had saved this man with his own hands. Feelings would grow for anything picked off the streets—it would be like that for a cat or a dog, never mind a human.

Another thing came to You Miao's mind as he watched Li Zhifeng: did this Quanrong slave harbor feelings for him? There should be *something*, right? Elsewise he wouldn't have gone on that whole spiel about "order me to live, then I shall live; order me to die, then I shall die."

But sometimes, what was said and what was done were two completely separate things.

“Hey!” You Deyou glared at him.

You Miao snapped out of it and threw a little *heh-heh* laugh. You Deyou had stopped falling for his innocent act, however. He gathered himself and was just about to yell some more when You Miao stumped his uncle first.

“How about this?” You Miao suggested. “Shu, I’m in the middle of a quarrel with Li Yan. When he comes looking for me in a few days, I’ll give this guy back.”

Li Zhifeng raised his head slightly when he heard this and glanced at You Miao.

“Well, don’t wait on it! Take care of it as soon as possible!” You Deyou said.

“Okay, okay, okay,” You Miao placated. He then gave Li Zhifeng a kick and ordered him to follow him out.

“Miao-zi,” the madam hastily called after him. “Don’t take this man to your room anymore, lest he seeks revenge…”

“Fine, fine, fine,” You Miao replied. “I know what I’m doing, Shenniang.”

As soon as You Miao returned to his wing, the butler came to make sure Li Zhifeng would sleep in the firewood shed. You Miao knew he couldn’t mess around anymore, so he had no choice but to tell Li Zhifeng to move. The butler dismissed Li Zhifeng with a set of tattered bedding, but when You Miao saw the butler was going to lock up the shed, he got angry.

“What are you doing?!” You Miao barked.

“It’s the master’s orders,” the butler quickly explained. “In case he acts out.”

“I’ve kept him in my room for half the month, and he hasn’t done anything to me! *Now* you’re afraid he’s going to act out?!” You Miao demanded.

“W-w-well…” stammered the butler. “Shaoye, this is the master’s order…”

You Miao didn't care anymore. He exclaimed, "I spent *two hundred and fifty silver* on him, yanno! He's gotta serve me. If you're gonna lock him up, why don't *you* pay me back my money, huh?!"

"How about this?" said the butler after a moment of hesitation. "Shaoye can have the key?"

"Give it here," You Miao said tersely.

The butler locked the shed door. You Miao subsequently took the key and reopened it right in front of the butler's face, but the butler had no choice but to leave resentfully. You Miao peered into the firewood shed. Li Zhifeng was leaning against the wall, hugging his knees. When the door reopened, he looked up and gazed at You Miao.

You Miao left. Over the next many days, Li Zhifeng still did everything as normal, except now he lived in the firewood shed in the backyard. Every morning, he rose before the sun was up and sat outside You Miao's room. Once You Miao was up and opened the door, he'd go in to wait on him.

The servants all whispered among themselves about this newcomer, but Li Zhifeng didn't talk to anyone. The little concubine had expressed admiration for this giant of a man, while the madam believed Li Zhifeng was only trying to demonstrate his loyalty.

Many more days passed. With only a few dozen of silver left, You Miao went out to find Li Yan to ask him about the Quanrong slave. He had to get the truth straightened out before he knew what to do with the guy.

That day, while You Miao and Li Yan were watching a play, You Miao decided to ask his questions.

"Hey," You Miao called.

Li Yan shot him a side glance. You Miao scooted over and cuddled him as he whispered affectionately into his ear, "Let me ask you something. About that Quanrong slave…"

"What, he popped your cherry?" Li Yan asked.

"No, no… Wait, what are you saying? Ah! Did he pop *your* cherry? Ha ha ha…" You Miao laughed, pointing at Li Yan.

Li Yan flew into a rage and retorted, “Keep talking shit and I’ll cut off your tongue!”

You Miao motioned for them to go back on topic and asked, “The Quanrong… The capital doesn’t permit them to be kept?”

“Just say I gave him to you, and it’ll be fine,” Li Yan said. “Legally, they can’t be kept. But you think I’d be afraid of those kiss-asses in the Ministry of Justice?”

“Why can’t we keep them?” You Miao asked.

“Thanks to state feuds, more or less,” Li Yan replied dismissively. “Why else would there be so many crappy rules?”

“Is it that serious?”

“You southerners don’t understand…” Li Yan started.

As Li Yan began his explanation as to why a Quanrong slave couldn’t be kept, it just so happened that the play on stage was “Lady Zhaojun Crossing the Frontier[21]”.

The Tianqi Dynasty [22] had always experienced conflicts at the northern border. A hundred years ago, a treaty was signed with the Barbarian tribe Di, and both sides enjoyed peace for a number of decades. However, ten years ago, the Barbarian tribes north of the border began to rise up, causing havoc and small skirmishes along the frontier.

At the time, five Barbarian tribes—the Quanrong, Xianbei, Jie, Qiang, and Di—had formed an alliance and frequently encroached on the Tianqi border. The Tianqi were beaten back at the Battle of Mount Jueyue. Seven great cities along the border had suffered bloody massacres at the hands of foreign invaders, planting a deep-seated hatred between the Han people and the Barbarians. Both sides had been at odds for years, with victories and losses split here and there.

Later, when the Quanrong king passed away, a number of Quanrong princes fought endlessly for the throne. The flames of their civil war spread, setting the other Barbarian tribes ablaze. The Han people used this chance to dispatch a new wave of troops to the Yin Mountains.[23] After a gruesome

battle, the Quanrong retreated beyond the Great Wall. Their power had suffered significant damage, and as they had been simultaneously facing political decline, they lost their place of leadership among the tribes.

The prisoners of war had been transported back to the imperial capital. There were rumors that the Quanrong king's youngest son had gone missing; the eldest son ascended the throne but never came to seek the return of prisoners of war. Thus, some Quanrong captives were held in custody, some were sent to do hard labor, and some were sold to the Royal Academy. Every Quanrong was an expert fighter; one Quanrong warrior was equal to a hundred men. This was why when they were brought in, they were force-fed muscle paralysis powder to deplete them of their strength and put them at anyone's mercy.

You Miao was dumbfounded by what he heard.

Li Yan went on to explain further. "Trust me. If that guy could use martial arts, we'd be the first ones he'd kill. When the Quanrong encounter us Han, they'll fight without hesitation. The Quanrong rape our women, and we Han slaughter their villages. This isn't something where a few nice words can change a mind."

You Miao was dubious about that claim, but when he thought about it, it was true. Anyone would surely seek to kill in vengeance if they were tortured into such a horrible state by Li Yan.

"Then why didn't you…" You Miao prodded carefully, "come up with a more reliable method?"

"That's why I was gonna kill him!" Li Yan said. "But in the end, you took him, didn't you?"

You Miao had nothing to say to that, so he only gave an embarrassed laugh. "Heh, heh, heh. C'mon, I didn't know!"

"At first, I was just gonna bring him home for some fun. But that guy was super stubborn…" Li trailed off. "Whatever, forget it. You just take it easy with him. Play around for a few days, then kill him. It's only one swing of a blade. If you can't do it, send him back here and I'll kill him for you."

The whole speech had You Miao feeling rather worried. Just as they were getting back into the play, a servant came to call for him, saying a letter had arrived from the master back in Pei County in Liu Prefecture. You Miao's stomach dropped. He hastily bade Li Yan farewell and went straight home.

The northerly winds were blowing hard inside the courtyard. You Miao rubbed his hands as he descended the sedan. On the way to the study, You Miao stopped when he saw Li Zhifeng sweeping the snow in the east wing. Li Zhifeng immediately noticed him and put the broom down, looking like he wanted to come over but didn't dare to. It was severely cold out, yet Li Zhifeng only wore a thin layer of clothing. It was as if he wasn't afraid of the cold at all—the thin, coarse cloth robe only showed off his tall and muscular body, like silk wrapping iron.

"Go inside by the fire!" You Miao called to him.

Li Zhifeng looked like he wanted to say something, but You Miao gestured for him to go in while he himself turned and entered the study.

Inside, You Deyou glared at You Miao.

"So, what did my dad say?" You Miao asked with a bubbly smile, having changed his face.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" You Deyou tossed the letter at him. He stared hard at his nephew's face to gauge his reaction as You Miao opened it.

There was nothing in the letter about how You Miao had been frittering his days away. It only vaguely mentioned that it was time for You Miao to start and establish a proper family of his own. Back in his day, his father had divided the family assets with his brothers and started out on his own at the age of fourteen. Now that You Miao had achieved some success in his studies in the capital, he needed to start thinking about his career as a man.

Incidentally, this year was colder than the previous years, and there had been rumors that the defense at the northern frontier was shaky. You Miao was dearly missed, so he should pay a visit home. If he had nothing else going on, then he should have You Deyou make the arrangements for him to join the caravan going south. They would take the northern road up first

before turning southward, crossing through Cang Prefecture before entering Liu Prefecture.

That works out, You Miao thought. He could go home, check things out, and ask for money while he was there. Establishing a proper family or whatever was all just talk. His studies at the capital weren't finished, so making him go home now was more likely so they could have him marry.

"Heh." You Deyou smirked. "Take a guess about what your dad is thinking?"

"Heh, heh, heh." You Miao also knew his father's letter wouldn't deceive this seasoned fox. "He wants me to marry? To have a wife keep me in line?" he answered as he tucked the letter into his breast pocket.

"So you *do* know you need to have a wife to keep you in line, too, do you?" You Deyou said. "Don't hurry off. Let me ask you: where's that Quanrong? When are you going to dismiss him? You absolutely *cannot* bring that man home!"

After You Miao gave an "oh" in response, You Deyou added, "He must be dismissed before you go home! Return him to wherever he's from!"

You Miao was a little reluctant, so You Deyou lectured some more. "Once you're back in Liu Prefecture, you won't lack for two hundred silver from your dad!"

"Yes, yes, yes," You Miao replied.

Although that was what he said, You Miao was actually rather unwilling. He had wanted to stay for a few more days—who knows, maybe the people in the residence here would get used to having Li Zhifeng around and stop minding him so much. However, since his father had summoned him home, the Quanrong slave couldn't be left behind in his uncle's house. Otherwise, Li Zhifeng would be pawned or sold off behind his back as soon as he left.

He couldn't be sent to Li Yan's house either—Li Yan would kill him without blinking.

What if he brought him along on the road? It wasn't like You Miao could take him home, so he would have to free Li Zhifeng halfway and have him

go find a life for himself. Although You Miao kept saying he spent two hundred and fifty silver, at this moment, it felt like Li Zhifeng's worth wasn't as simple as money anymore.

You Deyou sent You Miao to go prepare and pack. It just so happened that the winter merchant caravans would depart the capital in the next few days. There were two roads from the capital that led to Liu Prefecture in the Jiangbei region: the first road was along the Yellow River, going down Mount Dong then entering the borders of Cang Prefecture. However, this road was bumpy and the carriages would wobble, rendering it an incredibly unsteady ride. Furthermore, crossing through hills and mountains would make the trip take at least forty-some days.

The second road headed north of the capital and went eastward along the frontier before turning southward at the Shanhai Pass. This was an official highway, so the road was much steadier. However, the frontier suffered heavy snow and blowing winds, so the trip would take at least a month as well.

A thought struck You Miao, and he said, "I'll go with the northbound merchant caravan."

"Up to you," replied You Deyou gruffly.

You Miao added, "I'll bring the Quanrong slave with me. I'll find a random place to release him, so you don't have to worry about this anymore, Shu."

When You Miao left, You Deyou's solemn expression looked as if he'd just sent away a God of Misfortune. As You Miao passed down the corridor, he mulled over the upcoming trip. His decision to take the north road had been made on a whim. Wasn't Li Zhifeng just some Quanrong slave? When they reached the border, You Miao would just give him some money and dismiss him, grant him his freedom, and burn the slave deed after. You Miao would consider this as a good act.

CHAPTER 3

Back at the east wing, Li Zhifeng still sat on the veranda with one knee drawn up, watching the snow fall. The grounds had only just been swept, but it was already covered in wet bits of ice again. At the sight of You Miao's return, he finally rose to his feet and followed You Miao inside.

Once in the room, You Miao huffed out a breath and sat on the edge of the bed. Li Zhifeng got down on one knee to remove his boots, then placed them by the fire pan to dry.

"It's snowing outside. Why aren't you wearing more?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng did not answer, so You Miao added, "I'll get you a fur robe tomorrow."

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao commented, "Then again, you Quanrong live beyond the wall where it's freezing all the time. So you're probably used to it."

Li Zhifeng still did not answer. He picked up a brush and gently swept off the snow from You Miao's boots. You Miao had already grown accustomed to how to get along with this guy, though.

"I have to take a trip back home tomorrow," You Miao said.

The brush paused.

You Miao continued, "You don't have to stay here. You can go with me."

Li Zhifeng set one boot down to the side. "If I am too much trouble, simply order me to kill myself."

You Miao didn't quite hear him at first, but was then taken aback when he registered what he had said. However, Li Zhifeng carried on like he hadn't said anything at all.

"I'll go tidy things up."

You Miao wiggled his bare feet from where he sat on the bed. He wondered whether he should tell him about his intention to free him. Maybe not—if he could take him home and keep him, then You Miao didn't actually want to let him go. It was just that his old man was even harder to hoodwink than You Deyou—he would definitely ask where the new guy was from, and then demand to see the slave deed once he found out about that. Nothing could sneak past him.

Besides, he probably shouldn't be taking a Quanrong slave everywhere anyway. Keeping slaves had always been one of those "don't ask, don't tell" kind of things with the government, after all. What a shame. He didn't even get to use him much yet.

Something else occurred to You Miao, and he called toward the screen, "Li Zhifeng?"

Li Zhifeng emerged, and You Miao said, "How about you sleep with me tonight and teach me how things go? I'm probably getting called home to get hitched."

Li Zhifeng regarded You Miao with a complicated expression. You Miao quirked an eyebrow and looked back expectantly.

"Normally, I listen to you," Li Zhifeng said. "But in bed, you have to listen to me."

"Fine by me," You Miao agreed. "It's not like I know anything anyway."

Li Zhifeng narrowed his eyes and stared at You Miao for a moment before he finally gave a curt nod. The way You Miao saw it, he was going to have to let Li Zhifeng go soon anyway, so he might as well use him for all he was worth. Waste not.

But Li Zhifeng was tall and toned, and You Miao had never bared himself in front of another before. The most he'd ever done was fool around with Li Yan and the gang, and maybe get pinned for a smooch. He couldn't help feeling a bit nervous at the thought of actually getting it on with a bed slave.

During dinner that night, You Deyou and his wife bombarded him with words of wisdom, which all went in one ear and out the other. You Miao barely registered half of it since his mind was wholly on doing the do.

When he returned to his own room, he found Li Zhifeng waiting for him on the veranda as always, standing tall and upright.

Li Zhifeng's expression was coolly stoic as he helped You Miao undress. Left in only his underclothes, You Miao lay down on the bed and scooted close.

"Don't forget, you have to listen to me in bed," Li Zhifeng reminded him.

You Miao breathed an "mn" in reply.

Li Zhifeng thus moved to untie his own robes. He first took off his outer jacket, then undid the inner layer, revealing the tanned skin of his chest and firm, beautifully defined abs. You Miao swallowed despite himself. Li Zhifeng pulled off his belt and let his trousers drop to the floor. Already half-hard, he lifted one toned leg and stepped onto the bed before he turned to sit at You Miao's side. Then, he reached over without a word to pull him closer. You Miao's heart raced, and he suddenly wanted to evade his grasp. When he turned his head away, however, he felt Li Zhifeng's strong arms wrap around his waist, followed immediately by an assertive hand reaching beneath his thin undershirt.

Startled, You Miao made a grab for his hand, but Li Zhifeng was having none of it. He lowered his head and pressed their lips together.

"*Mmf*!" You Miao grunted.

Li Zhifeng's eyes were fixed on him even as their lips melded intimately together, and one large hand traced along his chest before his tongue was pushing past his lips without giving him any time to think. You Miao couldn't even describe this feeling—it was his first time being so intimate with a man in all his fifteen years. He instantly flushed, wanting to push the man away, but Li Zhifeng crumbled his will.

When their lips parted, Li Zhifeng stared him pointedly in the eyes.

You Miao finally remembered that he had agreed to listen to him earlier, and obediently stopped squirming. Li Zhifeng leaned in to resume the kiss, and You Miao's nose was filled with the light scent of him—that musky scent of virility, palatable and enticing. Li Zhifeng kissed him heatedly, frenziedly; kissed the breath right out of him while he swallowed, helpless.

You Miao clung to Li Zhifeng's arm, feeling his large, calloused hand making its way downward, tearing open the thin layer of his undershirt and then his belt, all the way down to that place between his legs, where You Miao was already hard and standing at attention. Li Zhifeng took him into his hand, making his entire body tremble with every stroke, straining with how good it felt.

You Miao's mouth was wet with saliva when they parted again, his face was bright red, and his eyes were brimming with tears. But Li Zhifeng's hands did not idle; one held him by the waist while the forefinger of the other lightly fondled the head of his erection, rubbing and kneading until it was beading with precum.

"W-wait." You Miao felt like he'd become Li Zhifeng's plaything, but he was undeniably skilled, relentlessly assaulting his most sensitive places. He'd just turned his head when Li Zhifeng pressed a kiss to his neck, the bridge of his nose nuzzling against his ear.

"*Ah*!" You Miao couldn't help crying out, his pupils contracting. He turned back to find Li Zhifeng was once again watching him carefully.

Li Zhifeng reached up with his fingers covered in You Miao's arousal to pry his lips open and press in for him to suck.

Thoughts in utter disarray, it was all You Miao could do to instinctively follow Li Zhifeng's movements. Li Zhifeng's expression was cool and detached even as he was doing such lewd things. You Miao pulled off his fingers and swallowed, then wrapped his arms around the other's neck and buried his flushed face into his shoulder.

Li Zhifeng released him and dropped a chaste kiss on his cheek. The gesture made You Miao's heart clench with the way it made him feel adored and pampered. When he looked up, Li Zhifeng's eyes were undulating like twin pools of water. He untangled You Miao's hands from around his neck and guided them downward, parting his fingers and wrapping them around his massive length before leaning down to capture his lips again.

You Miao barely even had time to breathe between kisses; the proud cock in his hands felt so hot it was almost scalding. Every line of its length

prominently defined. It was thick and long and so, so hard, and the round swollen head already dribbling stickiness all over his hands.

Li Zhifeng lifted his hips slightly, his length sliding out of You Miao's hands until only the tip remained between his fingers. But You Miao seemed almost infatuated with holding that large cock. Noticing this, Li Zhifeng arched his back lightly, pushing back into his hands for him to grasp. Delirious from kisses, You Miao's hands wandered along the hardness, fingers caressing its masculine beauty and making it twitch in their wake, the leaking wetness gathering in his palms with little lewd noises.

"Don't…don't touch there…" You Miao's brows furrowed in discomfort when he felt two fingers press into his opening; he hurriedly turned to stop him, but only got his earlobe bitten instead.

Li Zhifeng bit and tugged on his ear, the feeling so stimulating it made him shudder and spasm. Their eyes met when he turned his head, and Li Zhifeng released his ear to devour his lips instead.

Li Zhifeng motioned for You Miao to open his legs as he licked the corner of his mouth and pulled away with a silvery thread trailing between their lips. You Miao, breath coming out in little pants, did as he was told and spread his legs. Li Zhifeng pulled the quilt over their naked bodies, then reached over for the mink oil.

"Hah…hah…"

As he stared, transfixed, at those sensual, defined lips, You Miao couldn't help wanting them to kiss his again.

Li Zhifeng gazed into his eyes, quirking a brow.

"Kiss me…" You Miao's eyes were watery, already addicted to his kisses.

Giving him a nonchalant look, Li Zhifeng twisted the lid off of the oil container and flashed a dismissive smile.

You Miao was dazed by the sight—it was the first time he'd ever seen Li Zhifeng smile. He was usually so stoic and straight-faced, but he looked

breathtakingly handsome when he smiled. It made You Miao's heart beat faster, and he reached up to wrap his arms around his neck and leaned to kiss him. Li Zhifeng turned to pin him against the bed, oil-slicked fingers trailing down his erection and pressing into him again, breaching his body without any warning and pushing all the way inside to that cluster of nerves deep within him, bearing down on that spot, stroking and rubbing.

You Miao's entire soul departed from the pleasure; his body was powerless to resist as he was kissed right into the bed. With only a few prods from those fingers, the base of his cock was already throbbing unbearably like he was about to lose control of his bladder. A moan escaped unbidden as the muscles of his belly tightened and he stopped breathing for a second.

Looking as though he'd gained what he'd expected, Li Zhifeng pulled his fingers out to work over his own cock before leaning over You Miao. And then his cock was pressing relentlessly inside, oil and fluids slicking the way.

The sudden excruciating pain made You Miao want to scream, but Li Zhifeng was faster; a hard hand closed over his mouth before he could make a sound.

Being split open on that large cock hurt so much that You Miao's eyes were instantly welling with tears, convinced that Li Zhifeng was going to kill him. He tried to struggle but Li Zhifeng had him firmly pinned down, his grip unyielding. He pulled out, then fucked back in. You Miao was helpless to resist as that massive cock pushed all the way in, impaling him on its length and wringing strangled sobs from his throat; he felt like he was going to retch. Then Li Zhifeng pulled out completely. The rounded head pressed lightly against the still-open hole, prodding it gently.

Li Zhifeng finally let go of him, watching his eyes carefully as he brushed his lips lightly with his own. There were tears spilling past the corners of You Miao's eyes, and his gaze was begging for mercy, but Li Zhifeng was unmoved and only kissed him with cool impassiveness as he pressed slowly back into his body.

But You Miao wasn't yelling anymore. His trembling lips met with Li Zhifeng's fiery ones, sucking on the tongue against his own, He could feel that massive cock inside him, opening him up and pushing all the way in to the deepest parts of him, but it was nothing like the unsparing savagery of the first time—the slow pressure was sending a faint ripple through his body instead.

Li Zhifeng drew his leg up and nudged You Miao's legs further apart with his knee. And then he started to move, fucking into him, and You Miao couldn't help but moan as pleasure mixed into the pain with every thrust.

"Ah…ah! *Ah*!" You Miao cried brokenly as he clung desperately to the other's shoulders. Li Zhifeng watched his expression carefully; it was You Miao's first time experiencing something like this, and he couldn't help the tears rolling down his cheeks. Li Zhifeng kissed the tears away.

"Ah, ah, ah…ah…" His voice was starting to get hoarse.

Li Zhifeng thrust ruthlessly into him a few more times, then suddenly pulled out until only the tip was left inside, leaving You Miao feeling indescribably empty. By the time he managed to pull himself together a little, his erection was throbbing uncontrollably and there was a mess of his own making on his stomach.

Kneeling between You Miao's legs with his cock still inside him, Li Zhifeng was a vision as he ran a hand down his own chest and abdomen, glossy with You Miao's slick in the dim light passing obliquely through the bed curtains. You Miao couldn't resist clutching Li Zhifeng's waist.

"C…come in," he pleaded.

Li Zhifeng arched his back slightly, driving a good part of the way in. You Miao threw his head back, his throat working in a swallow, only to have Li Zhifeng slowly drag back out. And then he slowly pushed back in, finally giving You Miao that indescribable feeling of fullness. The hard length breached him inch by inch, pulling back a bit then fucking in hard, pressing into and grinding against that spot in him that lit his nerves on fire.

"Give me…give it to me…" You Miao wanted nothing more than for Li Zhifeng to push deeper, fuck harder. He hugged Li Zhifeng's shoulders as

the man bent to kiss him once more.

"Mmn…"

Li Zhifeng's breaths were coming out in harsh pants now as he fucked him, the sound of flesh against flesh lewd in the air. You Miao didn't know how much more of this he could take; every thrust jolted his body, his blush spread down his neck to his chest, but Li Zhifeng slowed down just as he was about to tip over the edge, denying him release. You Miao's voice had already gone from moaning to pleading, begging him to go deeper, to fuck him harder, please, *please*—

You Miao could barely even talk anymore; his thoughts were hazy and muted. With a thumb caressing his cheek, Li Zhifeng captured his lips again in a passionate kiss as he set a brutal, tempestuous pace. This time, he didn't stop. With his lips sealed and that hard, massive length thrusting in and out of him, the merciless stimulation made You Miao's abdomen tense up, quivering, and he forgot to breathe for a moment before he came undone with a muffled cry.

"Ah—! Ah—! Ah—!"

The pleasure finally spilled over, and Li Zhifeng fucked him through it. You Miao's cock twitched as spurts of cum issued forth, hot and thick, and the strings of white got on them both—catching Li Zhifeng on the stomach and chest and even reaching their necks.

"*Ah*—!"

You Miao felt spent and a little dizzy as he came down from the most intense high of his life.

Both of their fronts were wet and sticky with his cum. Li Zhifeng stilled, holding him around the waist, and stared into his eyes for a long while before pecking him on the lips. He buried his head against the crook of his neck, pressing kisses there. His soft, warm tongue flicked out to lap up the seed splattered there, trailing kisses down along his fair-skinned chest, licking him clean and swallowing his seed. He traveled all the way down to You Miao's cock, still half-hard between his legs, and there that tongue flicked out and dragged along his length, making him shudder.

“I…I’m good,” You Miao stammered out.

Li Zhifeng came back up and loomed over him. You Miao brushed his face with his hand.

“You’re…not done yet? Come on, then,” You Miao beckoned, and reached out to touch his cock, still hard as a rod and yet to come. You Miao had touched himself before, and had the mind to stroke him to completion.

However, Li Zhifeng said, “*We’re* not done yet.”

Startled, You Miao felt Li Zhifeng press back into him. He had just come, so how could he possibly take more right now?

He hastily said, “No way, hold up…”

Li Zhifeng paid his protest no heed and sank his cock back deep inside of him, thrusting slow and languid this time. But even then, the drag of his cock was really too much for You Miao’s oversensitive walls right now, and he kept begging for mercy and trying to push him off. Li Zhifeng grabbed his underpants from beside the pillow, bunched it up, and shoved it in You Miao’s mouth.

The underpants smelled like the musk between Li Zhifeng’s legs and a faint hint of urine; You Miao couldn’t help the wave of arousal that rolled through him as the heady scent flooded his nose, but getting fucked again so soon after coming ached all the same without a shred of pleasure to be found. He was desperate for Li Zhifeng to finish soon, yet Li Zhifeng only picked up the pace. He held You Miao from behind, letting him pillow on one arm while his other circled him around the waist before yanking his hips back and hitching one of his legs up and fucking ruthlessly into him like a male dog.

“Mmf—mm—!”

You Miao whimpered through the cloth in his mouth, muffled and strained at first, but before long his body began to thrum again, helpless against the rhythmic in and out. His opening felt numb, and heat surged through him as Li Zhifeng’s cock pounded against the inside of his belly, again and again.

“Mmf—*mmn*—!”

You Miao’s voice gradually changed from pleading to ragged moans, and his eyes glazed over, becoming unfocused. Li Zhifeng yanked out the cloth gagging him and replaced it with his fingers instead, making him suck on his fore and middle fingers. You Miao’s body was flushed all over with arousal as Li Zhifeng fucked him, fast again, slow again; he had never felt this good in his life, and he could feel himself starting to get hard again.

You Miao shuddered through another orgasm as Li Zhifeng thrust viciously into him, contracting helplessly around Li Zhifeng’s cock. Then he felt a warmth spilling inside him.

He turned to look over his shoulder and reached out to touch Li Zhifeng’s face.

Li Zhifeng kissed him, still buried deep inside, and said, “I don’t really know how to say anything romantic.”

“What are you talking about? I just… I still want more,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng kissed his ear with whole-hearted attention, whispering, “I’ll give everything to you. Everything…”

The second time felt so amazing that You Miao couldn’t help but want more. He was just about to ask if Li Zhifeng needed a break when Li Zhifeng turned and mounted him, bearing down with his weight as his massive half-hard cock slid back in slowly.

You Miao buried his face in the pillow, trying to keep his breaths slow and even, and felt Li Zhifeng grow to full hardness inside of him after only a few thrusts. Li Zhifeng’s stamina was even more indomitable this time. His weight was solid against You Miao’s back, and he kept one arm wrapped around his waist as he drove into him ceaselessly, driving You Miao out of his mind until he was drifting in and out of consciousness. His feet lifted off the bed as his hips subconsciously rocked against Li Zhifeng, trying to take him deeper. Slick dripped down his thighs, the sounds wet and obscene with each thrust. His own erection was pressed against the bed and dragged along the sheets with the rocking of their bodies. The friction was driving him mad. He cried out and was just about to come when Li

Zhifeng suddenly pulled him up and brought him off the bed, still fucking him all the while.

"Hahh…ngh…" You Miao was mortified. "D…don't…"

You Miao's legs felt weak, but Li Zhifeng held him upright and fucked him as they walked to the full-length dressing mirror in the room, not once pulling out. Then Li Zhifeng splayed him open and held him up like one would help a child pee.

Reflected in that copper mirror, illuminated by dim candlelight, You Miao could see Li Zhifeng's thick length thrusting in and out of his opening. It was dripping wet, and he blushed furiously at the unkempt sight of it all.

Li Zhifeng kissed his ear affectionately and gestured for him to reach out and touch. You Miao's fingers touched where they were joined and brushed against that large cock as it slid in and out. He felt the ridges of the protruding veins as it fucked into him, over and over; it was so intense that he felt like he might lose control of his bladder all over himself. Li Zhifeng rammed into him from behind, holding him up just like that until his arms got tired—after which he carried him back to the bed, lying down on it himself before settling You Miao on top and letting him ride his cock. He held You Miao's length in both hands, stroking and rubbing.

You Miao's waist was stiff, and his entire body was straining as he worked himself on Li Zhifeng's cock, the heat in both of them ramping to a head.

"*Ahhh*…" You Miao leaned down and kissed Li Zhifeng, coming again amidst the intimacy and feeling Li Zhifeng's cock twitch inside and cover his walls with his seed for a second time.

It wasn't yet dawn when a voice came from outside the door.

"Shaoye, the carriage is waiting outside."

You Miao blearily sat up in a daze. He almost thought that last night was a dream, but his legs shook when he tried to stand, and his hole was sore and swollen when he reached back.

Li Zhifeng, having already packed their luggage, came over to help him dress while You Miao clung sleepily to his waist with his face buried in his chest. Li Zhifeng maneuvered him into underclothes, then wrapped him in an insulated mink jacket, and finished off with a large fur coat and a hat.

The servants filtered in to wait on him while he washed his face and brushed his teeth, and he finally woke up a little. When he walked out the door, he saw Li Zhifeng with a clothed bundle slung diagonally across his back, receiving a meal box from one of the maids.

It was barely morning and still dark out. Not a sound was to be heard in the whole city. You Deyou and his wife were still asleep. There was a horse-drawn carriage waiting by the back entrance, where Shiqi-er was currently talking to the driver.

The butler turned to Li Zhifeng after helping You Miao into the carriage and said, "You. Follow the coach on foot."

You Miao waved his hand and beckoned. "Li Zhifeng, come on in," he said. "Shiqi-er, you go back. The weather's so cold, you don't have to go on this trip with me. Li Zhifeng will be enough."

The butler was about to say something, but decided against it.

"It's decided, then," You Miao said. "Don't any of you argue with me. I'm already going home, so what can you do, huh?"

"I'm off then, shaoye." Shiqi-er was delighted—the winter was bitterly cold, so who would want to go out and about? But he didn't forget to lecture Li Zhifeng. "Don't forget you're only alive because of the young master. Make sure you take good care of him."

"All right, all right," said You Miao, sending them all back until only the driver sent by the caravan to pick him up was left.

The driver gave him a sidelong glance and greeted, "Morning, shaoye."

You Miao fished out a couple of broken silvers to tip him, which the driver accepted with a bow. And then they were off.

Groggy, You Miao dozed off again in the carriage. You Deyou used this carriage on long trips, but it used to be a Procurement Carriage.[24] The

inside of the coach was sectioned into two using a curtain: the outer compartment by the coach door had two stools for servants and a cabinet for luggage, and the inner compartment had a narrow bed for sitting or sleeping with a pair of brocade chairs on either side, right by the window curtains. The coach also had a carved decorative exterior for wind resistance.

The stove was already burning merrily when he got in, so You Miao lay on the bed to catch up on his sleep. Li Zhifeng, on the other hand, sat in the outer servant compartment to put things away.

"Shaoye, breakfast is ready."

Too lazy to eat, You Miao replied, "Maybe later. Get in here."

Li Zhifeng lifted the curtain and entered as asked. You Miao made him sit on the bed, tugged his hand over, curled up in his arms and promptly went to sleep.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept for when he was woken by the growing commotion outside, horses neighing and dogs barking and all.

"What's going on out there?" You Miao asked, yawning.

"City gate," Li Zhifeng answered.

You Miao lifted the curtain to peer outside. It was light out now—it had snowed last night, but the sky was clear and blue today. The northern gate of the capital was bustling with activity, and cart drivers were hollering back and forth.

"What nice weather! We're off, then—!"

"Pray that the gods of travel are kind to us lowly lot. Pray the mountains that we climb and the rivers that we cross bless and protect us, pray all the goddesses watch over us. We ask nothing more than to make a humble living and return home safe and sound…"

"Dad! Bring me back something fun, okay?"

The merchant caravan was forming up. You Miao's driver shouted, "The little young master of the You family is here—!"

The leader of the caravan led a commander of the imperial guard around to all the carriages in turn, checking everyone off on the roster and taking inventory.

“Greetings, shaoye,” he said when they got to You Miao.

You Miao recognized this man—his name was Hao Sanqian, and he could often be seen bowing and scraping at You Deyou’s estate. You Miao acknowledged him with a nod. Behind him, Li Zhifeng opened the meal box and took out the food items one by one to warm on the stove.

“This gentleman here is the little young master of the You family,” introduced Hao Sanqian to the imperial guard commander.

“And him?” asked the commander.

Li Zhifeng looked up and met his eyes squarely. The commander appeared a bit suspicious. “You’re not a Midlander?”

“He’s my slave servant, called Li Zhifeng,” You Miao answered. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Then he dropped the curtains.

The military man lifted the curtain back up with his pike. “It’s not that, You-shaoye. The border tribes have had ongoing conflicts with the Central Plains for years now, as I’m certain you well-read scholar types are well aware. There are always concerns about Barbarian spies sneaking in, so I’m afraid he’s going to have to come with me.”

You Miao hadn’t expected some random little gate guard to be this full of himself. Incensed, he said with a frown, “How impudent! What is your name?”

The man did not back off one bit, and replied, “My name is Nie Dan, Captain of the City Watch Division. But you—with neither office nor title, I was going to let your manners slide in view of your young age, but how can you be this heedless of the rules?!”

Seeing the situation heading south, Hao Sanqian hastily apologized to Nie Dan. “General Nie, please don’t be angry. Our young master was just…”

You Miao hung out with nephews of generals and sons of ministers day in and day out, and even the chancellor's son was tight with him. Of course he didn't think much of some measly officer.

"Li Yan's the one who gave him to me, what're you gonna do about it? Let's go. To the city. Let's drag him out of bed, bright and early, to have some words with you, hmm?"

Too mad for breakfast, he was ready to alight the carriage with a sweep of his sleeves when a servant arrived on a horse from afar, breaking their stalemate.

"You-gongzi—!"

You Miao looked out the window while the servant got off the horse and offered him a box.

"Delivery from our young master. He heard you are going home today and prepared some traveling expenses for you. There is also a permit with the chancellor's seal, in case you are stopped at checkpoints because of Li Zhifeng. And a dagger, for self-defense."

You Miao accepted the box and opened it to find twenty silver—just a small gesture—and the permit. He took it out and waved it at Nie Dan, who gave a cold *humph* and waved to let them go.

The caravan set out in an impressive line of carts and carriages nearly a thousand yards long on the official highway. The winter sun shone bright in the clear blue sky. The needles on the pine trees were all frosted over, and the air was crisp and refreshing.

Watching as the squadron of officers vanished far behind them, You Miao sneered. "Some lowly officer. He must really love money to be that brazen."

"He was simply doing his job," Li Zhifeng said as he pulled a low table from under the bed. He propped it up, then poured heated congee from the metal jug and set it on the table.

"Heh. You don't get it," You Miao said. "These gatekeepers are all just in it for the money. They'll jump on anyone for some extra coins."

Li Zhifeng didn't reply. You Miao took a sip of the congee and said, "Have some too."

Li Zhifeng started setting some small side dishes on the table, and said, "I'll just have some flatbread."

Seeing that Li Zhifeng seemed to be talking more today, probably in a good mood from getting out of the capital and You Deyou's place, You Miao commented with a grin, "You were really something last night."

Li Zhifeng only looked at him from where he sat.

You Miao contemplated him. "How come you're like a whole different person in bed?" he wondered.

Li Zhifeng's face betrayed nothing, like a block of wood.

You Miao continued, "The things you said in bed last night… Oh man, no wonder Li Yan beat you up."

With Li Yan's explosive temper, calling him a slut and telling him to call "ge"[25] would lead to nothing short of getting skinned alive. The mere thought of it made You Miao want to laugh.

"Where'd you learn all that?" You Miao asked.

"The Royal Academy," Li Zhifeng answered.

You Miao nodded, thinking to himself that this was the real Li Zhifeng—it was like he'd been possessed or something last night, with what came out of his mouth.

"Have some," he beckoned. "This is way too much food for me to finish any time soon."

Li Zhifeng shook his head. You Miao knew that the kitchen girl who fancied Shiqi-er made extra so that Shiqi-er wouldn't go hungry on the road—how lucky for Li Zhifeng. You Miao hastily shoveled some more food into his stomach then gestured at him again to come eat, like calling a dog over. This time, Li Zhifeng didn't refuse, and he cleaned up the lukewarm congee along with the side dishes.

As the sunlight filtered through the curtains, You Miao said, “This road goes through Mount Yangkou and then along the Great Wall to Yanbian City. Past the bazaar of the frontier is you Quanrong people’s territory.”

Li Zhifeng nodded slowly. You Miao couldn’t resist testing him.

“Don’t run off on the way; go home with me.”

“I won’t,” Li Zhifeng said. “I will follow you.”

“There’s nothing I can do even if you do run off, actually,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng said nothing, and only sat there quietly. You Miao suddenly didn’t want to let him go.

“C’mere,” he said, waving him over.

Li Zhifeng shuffled over and sat. You Miao made him sit properly, then stuffed himself into his arms and clung to him, his hands roaming all over.

Li Zhifeng’s face was stoic as ever as he looked out the window at the passing scenery. You Miao couldn’t help but wonder what this guy was thinking about—his tribe? His past? The road was framed by a mantle of snow on either side, the icy boundaries gleaming like a world of glass. The warmth of the sun made him feel cozy and lazy.

And in the distance, the plains were an endless white under the blazing sun. Once past the capital region, the plains stretched out from both sides of the highway, open and boundless into the horizon.

CHAPTER 4

You Miao went right back to napping after breakfast. Li Zhifeng retrieved a painted wooden box from under the seat. He nipped a pinch of tea leaves from it, roasted the leaves over the fire, then added water. After bringing the tea to boil three times, the whole carriage coach was filled with the aroma of the brew as he held the cup for You Miao to drink from and wake up a bit. After digging out a book from the luggage, You Miao leaned lazily against Li Zhifeng and flipped it open. Li Zhifeng's slave deed fell out.

"..." Li Zhifeng didn't comment.

Flashing a grin, You Miao shoved the book in his face.

It was a record of customs from beyond the wall, written by a great scholar of the previous Liang Dynasty named Wang Zhi. It was the third volume in the "*Chronicles of Quanrong*" series of historical records.

You Miao had borrowed the book from Li Yan's place days ago to take home and read. He folded the slave deed and stuck it between the final pages of the book, then opened it up to the first page.

He mumbled aloud, "There is a tribe beyond the wall that worships beasts as gods. Wolf-like yet not, hound-like yet not; the reading of their tribe's name is very much like the 'Hound Tribe.' The men dress in wolf pelts and iron battle-skirts, and are strong and brave, hardy and enduring. The Hans at the border call them 'Quanrong'—The Armed Hounds." You Miao appraised Li Zhifeng's body as he flipped the page, trying to imagine what he'd look like in a pelt coat and iron battle-skirt, only to find Li Zhifeng had his attention fixed on the book.

"Have you never seen historical records about your tribe before?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng shook his head slowly. The slave tattoo on the side of his neck was all the more noticeable under the sunlight.

You Miao nestled into his arms and held the book up for both of them. The book wrote that the Quanrong tribe recognized strength above all, and so its people often fought and slaughtered one another. The men were well-built, and each and every one was a born marksman. They viewed the Han people as animals like pigs or dogs or wild beasts; before the northwestern border with the Barbarian tribes became civilized, the Quanrong would often invade the Great Wall to pillage food whenever there was a shortage. Even cannibalism wasn't unheard of.

"That's wrong," said Li Zhifeng, suddenly.

"What?" You Miao eyed him questioningly. "Which part?"

"We don't eat people," Li Zhifeng said.

"Of course not. Wang Zhi's book is full of bullshit," You Miao said.

There was a small tug at the corner of Li Zhifeng's lips. You Miao knew it for the smile it was, and began to cheerfully tell him about how Wang Zhi, despite being a famed scholar, had countless errors in the books he wrote and compiled. During his lectures at the Imperial College, You Miao always spotted a bunch of blunders without even trying. He ranted and raved for a good while, with Li Zhifeng nodding along the whole time, before he finally went back to flipping through the book. He stopped in shock at the section about social customs toward the end.

According to Wang Zhi, the Quanrong were distinctive in that—there were no women in the tribe!

There were no women or the elderly in the Quanrong tribe, only children and young men who moved together like a pack of wolves. The task of giving birth lay with women of other ethnic groups—sometimes from the Qiang, sometimes from the Jie, and sometimes, even the Han. Adult men of the tribe habitually traveled alone, and on full moon nights, they would wander along the Great Wall, roaming the area between the grasslands and the domains of other tribes to court women who'd catch their eye.

Lovemaking came after courtship, after which the men would promptly leave.

Seven years later, the father would return to the woman's tribe. If his wife had borne him a son, then the man would take the seven-year-old child with him, give him a horse, and they would gallivant across the grasslands together. If it was a daughter, the man would give her a sum of money as her future dowry.

The mother would then be killed by the man's hands.

Li Zhifeng let out a rare smile. "That's wrong too."

It was indeed ridiculous. You Miao said, "Of course it is. Who would kill their own wife?" Then he looked at Li Zhifeng and asked, "Did he make up the whole thing?"

Li Zhifeng shook his head slowly. "Only part of it. The husband doesn't kill his wife. After the full moon courtship and the union, he will give his wife a wolf fang as a token. When he returns in seven years, he will take his son back to the tribe. He will devote himself to raising and teaching the son how to hunt and live on the grasslands. If it's a daughter, he'll give her ten goats, five wolves, and ten rolls of pelts as dowry. And in the future, if the daughter is mistreated in marriage, she can ask the Quanrong tribe for help with the wolf fang as proof. Or if her husband can't provide for the family, she can ask for necessities from the Quanrong. So, among the forty-two tribes beyond the border, having a Quanrong father has always been a point of pride."

"And then?" You Miao asked. "What about the wife?"

Li Zhifeng replied, "When the son gets old enough to take care of himself, the father will retire to his wife's tribe, bringing with him his prizes from battles won, and spend the rest of his days with her."

You Miao nodded along; that sounded more truthful.

"But not many follow those customs anymore, these days," Li Zhifeng continued. "Some bring their wives back to the tribe now."

"Do you have a wife?" You Miao asked, curious.

Li Zhifeng shook his head. “Over there, we call courtship ‘Lone Wolf’s First Venture,’ you have to be seventeen to do it. I wasn’t of age yet when I was captured and brought to the Central Plains.”

You Miao understood. It was probably something like the Han’s crowning ceremony—a coming-of-age for the Quanrong. Lone Wolf’s First Venture was a fitting name, he mused. The thought of a young Quanrong man, seventeen years of age, at the prime of his youth, galloping along the Great Wall on his warhorse. A thousand miles of grasslands bathed in moonlight, stretching into the distance like the sea…it evoked a sense of yearning beyond words.

“How do courtships go?” You Miao asked.

“Some serenade, some play the Qiang flute,” Li Zhifeng answered.

It was an indescribably romantic and carefree picture: under the vast moonlit night, a young man of Quanrong circling outside a girl’s village playing the Qiang flute.

“Do the Quanrong only have one son, then?” You Miao asked. When Li Zhifeng shook his head, You Miao tried, “Two or three?”

Li Zhifeng thought for a moment, then replied, “It depends.”

You Miao gave an “mn,” and asked, “How many brothers do you have? Did you guys go hunting with your father when you were young?”

Li Zhifeng said nothing. You Miao usually wouldn’t pry, but thinking about how he was going to let him go soon anyway, he figured he might as well.

“Where’s your wolf fang?” he asked further.

Li Zhifeng didn’t answer. When You Miao picked him up back then, he didn’t even have clothes on, much less any wolf fangs. The only valuable thing in his possession right now was the jade pendant around his neck, and even that actually belonged to You Miao—a keepsake from his mother, one that he had lent him as a protection charm to save his life.

Lying in Li Zhifeng’s arms, You Miao reached out and picked up the pendant between his fingers, playing with it wordlessly. A strange feeling

sprouted in him toward Li Zhifeng in that moment—he thought he really was quite pitiful, and suddenly, he didn't want to let him go anymore.

But the lone wolf must return to his pack beyond the wall in the end. You Miao felt that someone like him really ought not to be a slave. When Li Zhifeng was fifteen, how exactly had he been captured and brought here? How had his claws been sanded down and fangs pulled out, whipped and beaten into submission until he stopped struggling and resigned himself to being a lowly sex slave?

You Miao was mischievous by nature and had certainly pulled his share of pranks, but he'd never do anything to humiliate another human being. Before she had died, his mother had once told him that everyone had their own fate. Sometimes life dealt you a bad hand and that was just fate; there was no point in blaming yourself. What was important was to remember to not be overly conceited when things go well, to not give in to despair when things were hard, and when seeing someone down on their luck, to give a helping hand if you were able; good deeds done in this life would be repaid in the next.

Although the Quanrong had been clashing with the Han for years and years, in the end, both sides were merely serving their respective rulers and the blood feud only grew ever deeper with no end in sight. You Miao kept flipping through the book. Wang Zhi went on to proclaim that the Barbarian tribes must be conquered by means of virtue; the correct thing to do was to assimilate via education. As the saying went, "northern Barbarians have no luck beyond a hundred years." Of the tribes that entered the Central Plains from beyond the border, those who refused to assimilate were annihilated, and those who were willing to become part of the Han lost themselves regardless.

You Miao spent the next three days in the carriage reading this book. The convoy set off before daybreak every day, and didn't stop until the moon hung high overhead; sometimes at a rest stop, other times camping out in the wilderness. These traveling traders led a hard life—some hauled their own goods to do business, others were hired by rich merchants to transport merchandise. There were people from all walks of life, and all of them were from the lower classes. Whenever they reached a rest stop, You Miao stayed

at an inn with Li Zhifeng waiting on him while the traders found somewhere warm at the post station to huddle up, spending the night drinking and warming themselves by the campfire.

It got colder the farther north they went. On the day they were crossing Mount Yangkou of the Qinling mountain range, snow fell heavily from the sky above, coming in waves amidst the howling of wind from every direction like a raging ghost. It was the biggest snowstorm of the season so far. Covered in a thick mantle of white as they were, the rise and fall of the mountain peaks called to mind a line of poetry—*Qinling shrouded in clouds, where is home? Lan Pass embraced by snow, hooves stand still.*[26]

"Hey-ho, ah, it's so freaking cold—!"

"Ah, Heavens don't snow us in—!"

"Hey-ho, ah, hope we can go home soon—!"

All the cart drivers bundled themselves up tightly until only their eyes were exposed. They hollered hoarsely as they urged the horses on. Even inside the carriage, You Miao could feel the bitter cold seeping in between the cracks in the windows and door.

It took them several days to cross Mount Yangkou. Once past, the sky abruptly cleared up; it was so bright and blue that it was as though the snowstorm never even happened. And before them, at the foot of the winding Great Wall, lay a bustling, flourishing border city—Yanbian.

Yanbian was the largest trading post at the border, established nearly four hundred years ago. All forty-two tribes from beyond the Wall came here to trade, and throughout the years, no matter how bad the war got, the Barbarian tribes always purposely left this city alone when invading the Central Plains.

Even those being hunted down, be they Han or Barbarian, could take refuge inside Yanbian. Their pursuers would have no choice but to give up the chase, however large their force—busting into the marketplace to hunt down and kill people was absolutely out of the question.

This was the result of a thousand-year armistice made between the ruler of the Huns and the emperor of the Divine Dynasty four hundred years ago:

no matter the state of relations between the two countries, Yanbian would always be a neutral ground on which no battles would be waged.

One by one, the cart drivers outside started cheering. You Miao had slept through the entire night, and he blinked open his bleary eyes and peered outside. They were halfway up the mountain still, and the wind was no less biting. But on the plains below them, nestled within the embrace of the Great Wall that continued eastward like a great big dragon, lay Yanbian. The city stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see; throngs of people came and went within its walls, the sounds of commerce carrying far enough to be heard even at this distance.

There was a huge lake outside the city, which was iced over and shimmered under the sun like a gemstone. Herds of cattle and sheep meandered toward the city on the snowy plains.

So this is Yanbian, You Miao thought to himself. It didn't quite have the bustle of the capital, but it certainly had its own beyond-the-border charm. The convoy left the Mount Yangkou area and headed downward along the plains.

You Miao glanced at Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng had his elbow propped against the edge of the window and was staring absentmindedly into the distance.

"Have you ever come to Yanbian before?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng gave a small nod and turned to You Miao, looking like he had something to say. You Miao wondered if they would run into anyone from Li Zhifeng's tribe at Yanbian. If Li Zhifeng wanted to run, this was both the best place and the best chance.

"I'll show you the good places," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao could tell Li Zhifeng was in a pretty good mood, so he asked with a grin, "Came here often before?"

The caravan was approaching the city gate now. Turning slightly to listen to the distant chatter of the Barbarian tribespeople, Li Zhifeng answered, "Not exactly."

You Miao nodded in response. The caravan would be at Yanbian for three days. He had already decided that when they headed off in three days' time, he would tell Li Zhifeng to leave and go home. They would each return to their own respective homes, and he wouldn't need to be a slave anymore.

Their first day at Yanbian was a flurry of activity: clearing customs and handling other such procedures and paperwork, booking rooms for all forty-some people, unloading the cargo and bringing the goods to the market. You Miao was just glad to finally get a breather after being on the road for so long.

It was hard being away from home. Growing up, You Miao rarely ever traveled—his only outing of any significant distance had been when he journeyed to the capital from Liu Prefecture. That had practically been a sightseeing pleasure trip, though; it was a far cry from the sorry state he was in now after a couple thousand miles of getting rattled around in a cart. You Miao couldn't help but whine, even though Li Zhifeng had taken care of him the whole way.

Their group ended up staying at the city's biggest inn. While the traders headed off to hawk their wares, You Miao brought Li Zhifeng with him to stroll around the market. The commodities at the border were mostly things like animal pelts and meat, rare herbs and other medicinal ingredients such as deer antler, penis, tail, and so on.[27] There were home-guarding wolf heads on sale, tiger pelt rugs, luxurious fox furs, grape wine from the far west, ambergris, thousand-year-old ginseng, exquisitely rare gems from the deepest mines, highly refined steel sheets… Any single one of these could easily sell for a fortune at the capital, or else become a precious item in the Imperial Emporium. But here at the bazaar in Yanbian, these items were piled up carelessly in the streets like litter.

On the contrary, it was the goods brought by the merchants from the Central Plains that were selling like hotcakes—candles, silk, slat, southern medicines, tea leaves, and even the second-rate pearls, corals, and scallop shells imported from East China Sea. There was a huge rush as soon as they appeared. Even something as ordinary as New Year's art from the Central Plains could fetch sky-high prices here. You Miao kicked himself for the

missed opportunity; if he had known sooner, he would've brought some stuff from the capital to sell too. Hao Sanqian really knew how to do business: he took low-grade tea leaves that people in the capital wouldn't even touch—not even casually while at the theater, the stuff that was worth no more than five coins for half a pound—and he'd trade it for decent quality fox fur here at the bazaar!

You Miao had seen that kind of fox fur sold to the wastrel sons of nobles more than once. Every time the Imperial Emporium got new merchandise in, Li Yan would bring them over to check out the goods. Something like this would cost at least five silver apiece, no matter how much they'd try to bargain for a "friend price" with the owner.

Five coins for five silver… You Miao was stunned speechless by the outrageous profits a cunning merchant could bring in. He couldn't help lamenting the missed opportunity again—if only he'd known sooner! He could've just thrown whatever into a cart and easily flipped it for several thousand silver here. Alas, even a thousand gold couldn't buy the knowledge of hindsight.

The bazaar was crammed full of people who rushed over with large piles of furs and big bundles of ginseng in tow, fighting each other to shove their goods toward the Midland merchants. There were those who noticed You Miao's status and tried to discreetly pass him their goods.

"Hang on, hang on! Hey, hang on! Don't just grab that! I'm not here to sell stuff!" You Miao shouted.

"Careful not to push the young master!" yelled Hao Sanqian. "Slow down! Wait your turn!"

Not everyone at Yanbian spoke the same tongue, so they could only gesture with their hands and speak the language of their respective tribes while they pointed at their own goods and then at the Midlands' goods. Some of them looked like they were about to start fighting over who got the stuff. Li Zhifeng stood next to You Miao to keep him safe. Upon seeing Li Zhifeng, who by all appearances was also from beyond the wall, any Barbarians thinking to squeeze their way through to You Miao backed off and dared not touch him.

“Take hers,” You Miao said to Hao Sanqian as he accepted a small box.

“Alrighty,” Han Sanqian responded with a smile. These traveling traders worked for the rich capital merchants, but they also had to listen to You Deyou—he was the one to decide who was even allowed into the caravan. And so, no one dared to offend You Miao.

You Miao flipped through a pile of furs, looking them over.

“Shaoye, your family’s business is the real deal,” teased one of the traders. “I’m surprised you’d even care for things like these.”

You Miao replied with a smile while picking out two fox furs, “I’m just gonna bring back a few to gift to friends.”

“The young master’s family business is no joke, though.”

“Seriously. Their Sunshower Maojian tea…”

The group of merchants spared no effort in flattering You Miao even while they busily sold their stock.

“A tael of tea leaves worth a tael of gold, huh.”

You Miao hastily gave a humble smile in response. “Oh, it’s not quite that grand. It’s simply thanks to support from friends.”

But the business ran by You Miao’s family was, in fact, quite grand. His father, You Dechuan, was a tea merchant. The family owned thousands of acres of tea plantations; about half of all the tea fields and mountains in the southeast region of Liu belonged to them, and they sold directly to the imperial government. That “Sunshower Maojian” tea of theirs had quite the market—it was harvested at the beginning of spring and delivered to the capital, the Sichuan region, and other such places.

All the merchants knew the saying: a tael of tea leaves from the House of You was worth a tael in gold. Every year when the spring teas came to market, three thousand pounds’ worth of tea leaves were given to the imperial family in tribute, and the rest sold out basically as soon as they hit the market. The demand overshot supply by far and the price hiked higher and higher. Even nobles and high officials had to pull strings if they hoped to buy any.

Hao Sanqian had his hands more than full, so You Miao helped out from the side. He pulled out a wooden box and couldn't help laughing when he opened it to find nothing but poor-quality fried tea—in the capital, already-steeped tea leaves were mixed and crushed with bits of blades of grass and then fried. The mixture was sold as fried tea to poor folks like manual laborers and cart drivers. This kind of junk tea could often be seen drying on the roofs of dingy alleys.

You Miao passed the wooden box over, and two of the merchants weighed the tea while a crowd of Barbarians gathered around to squint at the pointer on the scale, arguing for quite a while over the exact weight of it. A whole round of bargaining later, a thick stack of leather was traded for only five pounds of tea leaves, ten pairs of crudely embroidered shoes, and ten feet of blue fabric with auspicious cloud patterns embroidered in gold thread. You Miao ran some rough numbers in his mind—those things weren't even worth a string of coins, but the goods for which they were exchanged were worth at least forty, if not fifty, silver.

And after all that, the merchants even took the box back, which the Barbarians wanted as well. Although he was aware that one had to be cunning to be a merchant, You Miao really couldn't stand to watch this anymore.

"Ah, forget it," he said. "Just let them have the box. What's even the point in bringing it back anyway?"

The wooden box was lacquered in red and black, and was painted with the forms of beautiful women. The Barbarians might have thought it was some precious thing, but You Miao knew it was crudely made; not even an antique. It was something that wasn't even good enough for the average government official to use. But he noticed that the merchants were all trying to stifle their laughter, and only then did he realize that they were holding out—the box was also for sale. They weren't saying anything, and were waiting for the Barbarians to offer something in trade.

"Alrighty—you heard the young master," Hao Sanqian said with a chuckle. After another round of haggling, the box was traded for three pounds of tiger bone.

You Miao couldn't help but marvel. When the market dispersed for the day, everyone packed up and left, hauling bags big and small, to return early in the morning the next day and set up shop once again. Everything had already been traded off after only about a day's worth of time. As dusk settled over the market, they lit fires and gathered around the stoves to spend the night. The bazaar would run like this all the way until the Han celebrated New Year's, until the Five Barbarian Tribes observed Winter Solstice, and until the rest like the Jiemo and the Selang of the Western Territories had held their Food Festival.

Hao Sanqian came over to talk. "Shaoye," he said, "the Barbarians from further north are saying there's another blizzard coming."

You Miao didn't quite get it, and asked dumbly, "Should we stay a couple extra days, then? Can this place hold against a blizzard?"

Hao Sanqian replied, looking troubled, "That's what I'm afraid of, that it won't hold…"

You Miao finally came around. "Oh, I get it, I get it. Let's hurry on the road and head south then. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can all go home."

Hao Sanqian went off with a smile to get the carts loaded. In the end, they only got to spend one day at Yanbian before preparing to head southward. It wouldn't be the same road they took coming here; instead, they would follow the Yellow River south and then east into the borders of Cang and Liu Prefectures.

The setting sun was red as blood where it hung at the horizon. A flock of crows perched atop the city walls as the porters called lots to decide who was carrying the cargo and who was loading the carts. Sitting outside the inn, You Miao took a sip of steaming butter milk tea while taking inventory of his own haul.

Traversing the Central Plains to trade at the frontier was truly a lucrative business. You Miao felt itchy just watching everyone else barter their goods, so he ended up taking out some things he'd brought along for the trip to trade as well. In exchange, he got a high-quality snow tiger pelt, a packet of tiger heart and gallbladder, two bear paws, and four pieces of bear

pelt to bring home to his father. It'd make it easier to ask for more money this way.

You Miao made up his mind. In the future, if he ran out of spending money again, he would just come along with the caravan. He could definitely make his expenses back this way. He'd only do it twice a year, though—after all, permits were required to set up shop and do business, and it wasn't simple to get one. Not just anyone could join the caravan to the border.

Li Zhifeng took the stuff You Miao handed over and brought them to the carriage, his shadow stretching out long in the setting sun of the borderlands. The horizon was a mass of fiery red clouds, and in the skies to the north, a faint dark haze foretold the coming of yet another blizzard.

"Li Zhifeng," You Miao called. "Come have some tea and warm yourself up."

Li Zhifeng said nothing as he finished packing the things away and came to stand behind You Miao with his head bowed.

"Sit down and drink your tea," You Miao said with a smile. "This young master has something to say."

Li Zhifeng looked at You Miao for a long while before saying, "What is it?"

"Sit down first," You Miao insisted.

"I'm your slave," Li Zhifeng said. "I can't sit. And I serve you willingly."

"You're not my slave anymore," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng started slightly, then his sword-straight brows drew together a bit. Very seriously, You Miao took a small packet from his breast pocket and placed it on the table.

"Here. It's for you." You Miao grinned. "It's fate that we got to meet, I think. This is your slave deed. You're free from now on. There are also some broken silvers in there for travel expenses. Go on home so your tribe won't have to worry about you anymore. This shall be where we part."

Li Zhifeng froze. The wind rustled the banner signage above the inn and blew open the folded slave deed, revealing the broken silvers wrapped inside.

"Why?" Li Zhifeng didn't seem to understand.

"No reason, really," You Miao replied. "As the saying goes, one day together as husband and wife is…uh, worth a hundred in devotion. Anyway, all the same; go live your own life. This young master doesn't have much else he can give you."

The rims of Li Zhifeng's eyes were red as he stared wordlessly at him. You Miao, knowing that he was just overwhelmed by gratitude, felt a little bashful about all this and ended up babbling.

"To be honest, I don't really want you to just leave like this, either. But you're from beyond the Wall, there's no sense in you being a slave. My mom once said that everyone has their own fate—some are fortuitous, others not so much, and that even if you're unlucky, you can't really blame the heavens… I don't even know what I'm saying anymore. Anyway, go on and live a good life from here on out. Just take this as a gesture of our friendship."

You Miao wasn't even sure what he was rambling about. In the distance, Hao Sanqian was calling him.

"Shaoye—! It's time to go—!"

You Miao stood there in the sunset before a silent Li Zhifeng. He was a whole head shorter than him. He raised a hand to stroke Li Zhifeng's cheek, then clapped him on the shoulder, a little reluctant to let him go. But there was nothing to be done about it; it wasn't like he could take him home, since his father would definitely force him to leave once he found out.

Li Zhifeng might have cost him two hundred silver, but there was some fondness there after he'd personally saved his life. And besides, they'd spent so much time together these past number of days—even slept together once. You Miao was starting to understand why his father doted on his concubine so much.

Letting Li Zhifeng go was a good thing; he would just think of it as an act of kindness.

"Well then, I'm off," You Miao said. "Make sure you don't pick any more fights with the Han, okay? Remember that I'm the one who saved your life, so don't fight with the Han anymore! I'm leaving now! Mountains never age, rivers never dry; by luck, we shall meet again."

You Miao climbed into the carriage with a smile. Clutching his slave deed in one hand, Li Zhifeng stood there in a daze, rooted in place like a log as he watched the convoy leave, never saying a word the entire time. You Miao opened the window of the coach to look back, huffing into his cupped hands to warm them. The carriage left Yanbian, and Li Zhifeng's figure became smaller and smaller until it was only a small dot in the distance.

You Miao sat alone in the carriage as the caravan set off once again. The sky outside had darkened, and Hao Sanqian, huffing into his hands and rubbing them for warmth, came inside to attend to him. When he asked after Li Zhifeng, You Miao simply said that he had to dismiss him because there was no way to bring him home.

"Shaoye, you're a true saint," Hao Sanqian commented with a chuckle.

"Just gathering some good karma, I guess," You Miao said. "And he looked so pitiful."

"Life's a fickle thing, who knows when it'll toss out a disaster or two," Hao Sanqian added. "Shaoye, you live in the capital, and you're from an affluent family in Jiangdong to boot—unlike us traveling merchants, always handing our lives over to the heavens and praying to make it. Don't mind me saying so, but that really is how it goes. Shaoye is a good person, so he'll definitely be paid back for his good deeds, by the grace of the gods above, ever watchful…"

You Miao replied with a smile, "Mhm, that's how it goes."

Hao Sanqian kept up the flattery while rekindling the fire in the stove and making him tea. Outside, the wind whistled past and someone was hollering, so Hao Sanqian went back out to lead the way.

The wind picked up and snow started falling again, growing in intensity by the minute. The porters walked with their backs facing the wind, sometimes in a southward direction, sometimes following the official highway northward. This was the most difficult part of the route, with nothing but empty, endless wilderness in all directions. Moreover, the snowstorm was making things even more difficult, howling toward them like a massive giant taking ten miles per stride.

But You Miao knew that they just had to make it past the borders of Huang Prefecture and reach Liang Prefecture—then the sky would clear and the rest of the journey would be smooth sailing.

The caravan's route took these merchants to the frontier to barter goods from the capital in exchange for goods from the Barbarian tribes, before heading southward to resell those goods in the Liang, Liu, and Yang Prefectures. They rake in silver and money bills before finally reporting back to the capital.

At the capital, the Ministry of Revenue was ruthless in regards to tax deductions. The Ministry of Revenue issued trading permits—without which one could not do business anywhere—and they taxed fifty percent of the profit. You Deyou and the other bureaucrats, who handled merchant rosters and cargo registers, would take another forty percent on top of that, leaving only ten percent remaining to be split among the traveling merchants. But even so, tons of people still sent gifts and money to You Deyou's residence every year, desperate to secure their spot on that roster, all to get that forty silver from the trade expedition.

Once they got to the Jiangbei region, these pelts, bone, incense, and other such things could be sold for a ludicrous amount. And then it was off to Yang Prefecture to exchange for things like embroidery, tribute tea, cosmetic rouge…

Leaning drowsily against the window of the coach and just about to doze off, You Miao subconsciously reached next to him, but Li Zhifeng wasn't there.

After having had him at his beck and call for months, it was a little difficult to get used to him suddenly being gone. The wind howled from all

around on the outside, the sound rising and falling. You Miao curled into his clothes some more, cold and listless.

They came to a stop in a forest. Outside, Hao Sanqian yelled against the wind, “Shaoye! The wind is too strong to keep going! We’ll have to spend the night out here!”

You Miao tapped the window in acknowledgement. They were already hundreds of miles away from Yanbian; if they’d known this was going to happen, they would’ve just stayed to wait it out. No one had expected the blizzard to come upon them so fast, and now it was too late to turn back—they had no choice but to ride it out in the forest behind the hills. The porters were all bent over like shrimp, busily covering the cargo wagons with cloths to shield against the wind and snow, nailing everything down with wooden stakes as the coverings flapped and rustled wildly in the wind. Once that was done, the merchants all piled into the cart with the pelts and huddled up—they’d survive the storm first and worry about the rest later.

CHAPTER 5

You Miao had a restless sleep in the carriage, feeling uncomfortable everywhere. Wind snuck through every crack in the coach, causing his head to ache, not to mention the bedding was cold and damp. Finally unable to withstand it any longer, he climbed down from the bed and grabbed for a book before settling in front of the stove for warmth, bundled in a heavy blanket.

The wind outside was dying down. You Miao rather missed that guy, Li Zhifeng. Who knew how he was doing now? Just then, he heard the faint sound of hooves approaching. You Miao thought it was officials from Yanbian, but there wasn't any commotion around at all. He was just about to open the coach window when there came a devastated scream.

"*Ah*—!"

You Miao's heart jumped to his throat, and he figured out what had happened in an instant. The entire caravan was roused now.

"Caravan raiders have come! Watch out, everyone!" yelled Hao Sanqian outside.

Awful screams came one after the other, terrifying You Miao, his legs shaking and his face a ghastly white.

Hao Sanqian yelled again, "Everyone, pull out your weapons! Shaoye, stay in the carriage, don't come out!"

All by himself inside the coach, You Miao's mind was blanking out as his pupils slowly contracted. He had heard of caravan raids before—back in the days when there had been more unrest in the world, there were bandits everywhere who'd mug and kill those who transported goods. But the world was at peace, so how were there still raiders?

His heart pounded as he consoled himself and chanted "it's fine, it's fine" nonstop. If these men had the guts to venture this far out, it meant they had some skills. The merchants of the northwest were much tougher than mere thugs, so they must have been prepared already.

Another dreadful scream sounded outside, closely followed by the panicked whinnying of horses. You Miao immediately held his breath, bowing to crawl under the bed and look for the dagger Li Yan had given him when he left the capital. He gripped it in his hand and stayed hidden under the bed.

The voices of the raiders grew louder and louder as the mayhem outside intensified. You Miao couldn't see a thing, nor did he dare to peek. He could only determine how many people were out there and how the fight was going based on the noise.

"Watch out! They have arrows—!"

The yelling came to an abrupt stop, followed immediately by another scream.

The whistling sound of arrows came, and one broke through the window of the carriage and nailed into the wooden wall. The shaft was still quivering from the force. More screams sounded, but after a moment, silence descended.

The voice of a Barbarian man said something, and then there were footsteps approaching from every direction.

The Barbarian roared in laughter and spoke in a language You Miao could not understand a single word of. As he stayed hidden, he cursed at how absolutely moronic this band was—if they were raiding, why did they choose now of all times? Wouldn't it have been much better if they had mugged their caravan before they entered Yanbian? When the merchants had carried goods from the Central Plains? Mugging them now only meant the Barbarians would be stealing back their own furs and other specialties from beyond the border… And speaking of which, why *didn't* they choose to raid beforehand? The entire trek from Mount Yangkou all the way to their present location had been a golden opportunity. Why hadn't they raided them earlier?

Something vaguely crossed his mind. Li Zhifeng couldn't have been the one to have led these men here, could he?! No way, impossible… This thought was like a shadow, and it shrouded You Miao whole.

Without warning, the carriages started to shake, and You Miao was jolted again. The Barbarians were yelling, and soon, the entire horse-drawn carriage toppled to the left. The impact of the crash had You Miao see stars. The horses whinnied in terror, and the sound of hooves went off into the distance.

The entire carriage lay overturned on the ground. The coal in the stove fell out and landed on the blankets, setting the interior of the coach alight in the blink of a second. You Miao coughed loudly. Hearing the commotion outside, he knew he couldn't hide anymore, so he covered his head with his outer robe and pushed the window open. The Barbarians shouted randomly around his ears, and as soon as You Miao got out, he was picked up by the scruff and dragged along the heavy snow before he was thrown onto the ground. The snow was quite freezing.

I'm done for, You Miao thought. But even at a time like this, his priority wasn't to yell "I have money, don't kill me!" Instead, he couldn't help sneaking looks up to see if Li Zhifeng was among the group of men.

The Barbarians surrounded him like iron towers, bearing raised torches and ugly, fierce faces. You Miao was panic-stricken at first, but he gradually calmed after he scanned over the crowd. Thank heavens, Li Zhifeng wasn't there.

But then again, snitches didn't necessarily have to show themselves.

The leader of the Barbarians issued an order, and someone approached to bind You Miao securely and firmly, stuffing a tattered rag in his mouth and tossing him into the horse-drawn carriage that carried all the cargo. The Barbarians conversed excitedly with each other as they rode their horses. You Miao couldn't determine from which tribe they hailed. When he looked back, he noticed that the Barbarians hadn't ten carts—he figured a number of merchants must've fled earlier.

That must've been it. This band of savages saw he was vibrantly dressed, so they must be planning to use him as a hostage to demand a ransom from

the Tianqi.

Having thought this through, You Miao felt much more relaxed. His greatest fear right now was seeing Li Zhifeng among them. But with things as they were, it was pointless to dwell on the subject. He was the only live capture from the entire convoy. The Barbarians had been careless in their work, and didn't find and take away his dagger. You Miao lightly shook his right foot; he had previously stuffed the dagger in his boot, and it was still there, still heavy.

His arms were twisted behind his back, so it wouldn't be difficult to pull out the dagger and cut the ropes to escape. Yet it was extremely cold, and the plains stretched for as far as the eye could see. Where could he run even if he broke free of his bondage? It might not even take four hours before he froze to death in these icy plains. He wouldn't escape for now; he'd play it by ear. Based on the direction of the wind, You Miao determined that they were heading northwest, going further and further back where they came from… If they crossed the wall, he could probably forget about ever returning in this lifetime.

The dilemma seized him, and he tossed and turned as his thoughts churned, feeling glum. By the time he saw a village in the far distance, the foggy skies had already lightened. The sun was hidden behind a heavy blanket of clouds, and snow powdered the earth.

It was a village that had been reduced to ashes. It was obvious at a glance that this was a temporary spot the Barbarians were occupying after their pillages. Blood still covered the snowy ground, and abandoned bodies lay on the sides of the road.

A Barbarian picked You Miao up and threw him into a still-standing house. You Miao smacked his head against the wooden floorboards, and he writhed in pain as his sight briefly went dark. There was barely any light in this room, the only source being a few reddened pieces of coal inside a copper pot. There was also the sound of coughing.

"Mmm mmf…" You Miao wriggled over, a rag still stuffed in his mouth.

"Who's there?" said the voice of a young man from a corner.

“Mmm—!” You Miao flipped over and lay himself flat.

It was a while before You Miao’s eyes adjusted to the low light. When he scanned around, he saw a youthful stranger—about the same age as him.

“Were you captured too?” asked the youth in a low voice.

You Miao nodded slowly in response. The youth turned around, and used the hands bound behind his back to reach for You Miao and pull out the cloth in his mouth.

You Miao let out a long breath.

“Don’t talk…” said the youth. “They’ll hit us if we make a peep.”

And so, the two conversed in whispers.

“What’s your name?” You Miao asked.

“Zhao Chao,” answered the youth. “What about you? How did they catch you?”

You Miao eyed him. The youth was wearing leather armor and his shirt was in tatters.

“I’m You Miao,” he replied. “I was following the caravan going southward to Jiangbei, but we were raided on the way.”

“I snuck out to hunt with a servant. I hadn’t expected to run into these people, goddammit,” Zhao Chao griped.

“What tribe are they?” You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao lowered his voice. “A branch of the Tartar, I’m guessing…”

Something struck him, and You Miao asked, “Do they have any connection to the Quanrong?”

Zhao Chao seemed a little surprised by his question. “No, why would you ask that? The Quanrong are from the northeast, and the Tartar are from the northwest. They don’t even speak the same language.”

You Miao nodded, feeling the rock-heavy burden finally lift from his mind. “I’ll think of a way to save you.”

“Don’t do anything rash,” Zhao Chao said immediately. “This place is way too far from Yanbian, and they have dogs. We won’t get far before they catch up.”

You Miao acknowledged with a “mn,” and sat up arduously, joining Zhao Chao leaning against the wall. You Miao kept eyeing him. While this youth was wearing the leather armor of a soldier, he didn’t carry himself like one at all. His guard was stained with a lot of blood, and there seemed to be a sharp blade hidden in his eyes that was ready to devour. The coarse cloth shirt beneath the armor had been torn to tatters and barely covered his body.

“Can I ask you something?”

Zhao Chao emitted an oppressive, commanding air about him in between his words. Even when they were conversing in whispers, his tone allowed no room for dispute, forcing You Miao to pay attention.

“Which merchant caravan did you come with?” Zhao Chao’s face brightened as he asked in a low voice, “Was it the You Family’s Year-End Caravan?”

“Yeah,” You Miao said with an enthusiastic nod.

“You Deyou’s family, the clerk from the Ministry of Revenue?!” Zhao Chao said, his brows slightly wrinkled.

“You know him?” You Miao was shocked. “He’s my uncle.”

Nodding slowly in acknowledgement, Zhao Chao studied You Miao’s face under the faint firelight. “You’re from Jiangbei, right? You’re You Miao, aren’t you? So it really is you…”

You Miao was utterly stunned. “Yes, yes, yes! I’m You Miao! You know me?”

Zhao Chao fell silent. He simply gazed at You Miao, then flashed a small smile and nodded.

You Miao had never expected to bump into someone who knew of his family in a place like this. *Maybe things won’t turn out as bad as they could,* he thought to himself.

“Once the capital receives word, they will definitely send someone to come save you, so just be patient. But remember—don’t act rashly,” Zhao Chao added. “We must protect our own lives here.”

You Miao kept nodding, knowing that the young man before him must have come from an impressive background. “What about you?” he asked in a whisper.

“You don’t know me,” Zhao Chao replied. “My father is a small-time official. I came out hunting with friends, and I hadn’t expected to get captured. There’s no point in talking about it.”

“I’ve a dagger in my boot,” You Miao mentioned instead. “Let’s cut the ropes first?”

“Not right now,” Zhao Chao said. “We have to wait for an opportune moment. Don’t worry, we can escape for sure.”

After being so highly strung for half the night, You Miao was finally able to relax. He snuggled and shrank ino Zhao Chao’s side, resting his head on his shoulder before dozing off. Zhao Chao was somewhat taller than You Miao, and he somehow gave off a sense of security even though he wasn’t that physically strong and had the poise of a young master raised in prestige. It was as though the simple act of leaning on him made this gloomy and damp little wooden house feel safe.

You Miao was soon roused by the sound of voices outside coming close. When he raised his head, he found Zhao Chao had his head bowed and was gazing at him.

“What’s wrong?” You Miao panicked a little, his brows still furrowed. “Do we get to eat?”

You Miao couldn’t wipe his face since his hands and feet were bound, so he pressed his head into the crook of Zhao Chao’s neck and rubbed against the collar of his shirt.

“You’re rather good looking,” Zhao Chao whispered. “Who do you take after, your mom or your dad?”

“My mom.”

You Miao flashed a toothy grin, his lips flushed and full. Li Yan and others back at the capital were all sumptuously dressed, sprightly in their youth, high-spirited and perched on their equally high horses, but even with this as comparison almost everyone he met told him he was handsome. Except for his dad—his dad always dismissed him as an embroidered pillow with nothing but straw on the inside; good in looks only.

When the door opened, it seemed the sky had cleared outside. Light poured in, forcing You Miao and Zhao Chao to squint. A towering Barbarian walked in and tossed a flatbread and a few snowballs onto the ground. Just as You Miao was wondering how that could be eaten, the man approached him and picked him up by the collar. You Miao screamed.

"Leave him alone!" Zhao Chao barked.

A string of words came out of the Barbarian man's mouth, but You Miao understood none of it. What he saw next, though, was Zhao Chao forcing himself off the ground and ramming his head into the Barbarian biting down hard on his wrist. The Barbarian abandoned You Miao and threw him aside, instead grabbing Zhao Chao by the hair and slamming his head into the wall!

After a few loud thuds, You Miao yelled with a broken voice, "Let him go! Zhao Chao! Zhao Chao—!"

"Qui…quiet." Zhao Chao grunted as he was continually slammed against the wall. Completely enraged, the Barbarian then started to drag him toward the door.

"Zhao Chao! Zhao Chao!" You Miao shouted after them in tears.

The door was slammed shut with a bang, and soon after, the crisp sound of horse whip lashing rang from beyond it. It dawned on You Miao that Zhao Chao had given himself up for beating in order to save him, a stranger! Face streaming with tears, You Miao fell to his knees.

"Zhao Chao… Zhao Chao…" he sobbed.

You Miao dropped his head to the ground, sobbing and crying. Outside, Zhao Chao groaned in pain from the lashing while the Barbarians roared with boisterous laughter.

You Miao didn't know how long it had been before the door was opened once more and Zhao Chao fell in, his head covered in blood. He lay there, unmoving as a dead dog.

"*Zhao Chao*!" You Miao blurted.

Zhao Chao rolled and rolled, rolling strenuously until he made it to the wall before he replied, sounding half-dead, "I'm fine… Don't be scared."

Zhao Chao's face was covered with chunks of snow, his left eye was badly swollen, and there was a trace of blood at the corner of his lips. He leaned into You Miao's embrace as You Miao held him. You Miao's body was wracked with sobs. Zhao Chao buried his head in You Miao's arms, and after a few harsh gasps, he gradually quieted down.

"Go eat…" Zhao Chao whispered.

You Miao stopped crying and went over to where the flatbread was, then dangled it into his mouth. He repeated this for the snowballs.

"Give me some water…" Zhao Chao said.

You Miao chewed on the snowball, then lowered his head when it was melted and fed it into Zhao Chao's mouth. After Zhao Chao gulped it down, You Miao turned to bite some flatbread, chewed it thoroughly, and fed it to Zhao Chao also.

You Miao's cheeks reddened. It wasn't that he had never kissed another man before, but for some reason feeding Zhao Chao was making his heart race right now. It felt as if they were promising each other their lives in this darkened room.

"Why did you save me?" You Miao asked.

"You're handsome," Zhao Chao replied dismissively. "I can't bear to let you be hurt, it's a matter of cherishing beauty. What's wrong with that?"

You Miao didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that. "I'll repay you for this."

"Kiss me again, and I'll take that as repayment," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao lowered his head to the ground to take another bite of the flatbread. As he chewed, he thought to himself that if he had befriended this guy back at the capital, then the two of them would've surely clung to each other all day, every day. What Li Yan, what Ping-Er? No one had treated him as well as Zhao Chao had. Most affecting be a young man's gentle attentiveness, and after experiencing *that* with Li Zhifeng, You Miao couldn't help but feel his heart aflutter.

When You Miao fed Zhao Chao again, Zhao Chao's tongue came nudging forward, feeding him something back. When You Miao bit into the object, he could only tell that it was quite a solid thing. He held it in his mouth, and he tasted a faint flavor of blood when he licked at it. It felt like an unconventional pearl.

You Miao made a noise of confusion.

"A gift from gege, ha ha ha," said Zhao Chao.

"What is it?" You Miao asked, his words unclear. He spat out the thing, letting it land on the front of his lapels. In the wan light, he saw that it was a broken molar tooth. He immediately understood—it had been knocked out when Zhao Chao was lashed earlier.

"Just chuck it," said Zhao Chao casually.

The rims of You Miao's eyes grew a little red. He picked it up again with his own teeth, turned his body to pull open his collar, then dropped the tooth in his inner pocket.

It was in this position that the two young men cuddled together in the corner of this dark house.

As the temperature inside the room dropped lower and lower, Zhao Chao started to sing, his voice raspy, as he leaned half of himself in You Miao's arms.

"*The world be vast… My heart be conflicted. This life be long, yet I have no more to ask of it… I sought, only to fail, yet I cannot bear to abandon…* [28]"

You Miao had heard this song before. In an instant, his mind was pulled to faraway Jiangbei.

"*Those who know me understand my anguish…"* You Miao sang. "*Those who know me not, wonder what I seek…*"

"You know that song too?" asked a tired Zhao Chao.

You Miao's mind was far away as he replied, "My mom taught me when I was young."

There was a hole in the ceiling above their heads. A full moon, bright against the night sky, cast its glow down through this gap.

"Is your mom in Jiangbei or the capital?" Zhao Chao asked.

"She's gone already. Buried in Jiangbei," answered You Miao.

"I was also taught that song by my mom," Zhao Chao said.

"Where is she?" You Miao asked.

"Also gone. Buried in Liang Prefecture," answered Zhao Chao.

"Your dad's gonna send someone to save you, right?" You Miao asked.

Zhao Chao smiled wryly. "I'm a concubine's son."

You Miao nodded in understanding. "What's your dad's position in the government?"

"An insignificant one," Zhao Chao replied. "No one cares about me at home; don't ask about it anymore. Being dependent on your dad, your mom, your ancestors—that isn't what being a man is about."

"Once we're out of here, just hang out with me," You Miao said merrily. "Rest assured, this young master has more than enough money for you to spend."

Zhao Chao started to laugh. "Sure. It's a done deal."

You Miao genuinely wanted to repay Zhao Chao for taking the lashings in his stead, if nothing else. "Let me sing a song for you.

"*Trees grow on mountains, branches grow on trees, but you don't know that you grow deep in my heart.*[29]"

You Miao's voice was clean and sonorous, and it made Zhao Chao's lips lift upward.

"*Song of the Yue*? Is your mom a Yue woman?" he asked.

You Miao nodded, and the two quietly fell asleep as they huddled together in one spot. It was in this half-asleep state that Zhao Chao whispered next to his ear.

"Once your family ransoms you and you're back at the capital, help gege look for someone. A man called Deng Lin in the Minister of Rites' household…"

You Miao knew that man. He usually got along with Li Yan and Ping-Er, and the households of the Ministers and Vice Ministers of Revenue and Justice, but that was because the fathers or uncles of those people were government officials in the imperial court as well as members of the Crown Prince's faction. However, the Minister of Rites and the Minister of the Supreme Court weren't in the same camp, so he hadn't really socialized with them.

"Don't overthink it," You Miao said. "If we can get out of here together, I'll spend as much money as it takes."

"It'd be best if we could get out of here together, but if not, then just follow my instructions and pass the message on to the Dengs, that's fine too. Let's see how our luck works out," Zhao Chao said.

You Miao answered him with an "mn,' and fell asleep leaning on Zhao Chao. It wasn't the most comfortable slumber, as his bound hands and feet were going numb. You Miao didn't know how much time had passed when Zhao Chao suddenly called to him.

"Wake up, You Miao," Zhao Chao urged. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" Still bleary-eyed, the half-asleep You Miao raised his head.

Zhao Chao's lips were practically pressed against his as he said in a low voice, "There's movement outside."

There was a dreadful scream from a Barbarian from somewhere far in the distance, and angry shouting—all in a tongue they couldn't understand

whatsoever. But You Miao understood the situation immediately.

"Someone's come to rescue us?" he asked.

Zhao Chao started, "Didn't you hide a…"

Before he even said anything, however, You Miao kicked out and a dagger dropped from within his boot. Holding the dagger with the hands twisted behind his back, he turned and cut the ropes tying him. It was an exceedingly sharp dagger that could cut iron as if it was common mud, so it took but one slash to break the bindings.

"Nice blade!" Zhao Chao praised. "Where'd you get it?"

Nervous, You Miao turned to cut Zhao Chao's bind and whispered back, "Li Yan gave it to me."

"Chancellor Li's treasure," taunted Zhao Chao playfully. "It could've been granted by the emperor, who knows. Tell me honestly now, buster—you're doing pretty well for yourself in the capital, aren't you? Does Li Yan have eyes for you? So much that he'd even steal his old man's toy for you?"

You Miao flushed and raised his fist, poised to punch, but Zhao Chao quickly stopped him with his newly-freed hands and took the dagger to cut the ropes around his feet.

You Miao started, "Keep that dagger on you—"

"Keep it for your own self-defense," Zhao Chao said, cutting him off. He shoved the dagger back in You Miao's hand, then caught the other hand and led him to the window. However, when Zhao Chao spotted someone running toward the little house in large strides, he quickly exclaimed, "Go back, now!"

The two retreated to the corner of the wall to hide, and Zhao Chao draped the ropes loosely over their bodies—You Miao took the hint and pretended he was still tied up. Just as they lay back on the ground, the door opened amidst a heated argument. A burly Barbarian with a big beard entered and closed the door behind him, standing guard to watch the little house.

The man said something to them. You Miao didn't understand, so he looked at Zhao Chao who also shook his head in return.

The guard peered outside the window as he hid, and loud screams continued to sound from outside. With every scream, You Miao's elation went up a notch, his heart beating like a drum inside his chest. He signaled Zhao Chao with his eyes, but Zhao Chao only shook his head, indicating for him to not act rashly.

There were a few points at which that guard wanted to rush out to help, but every time he hesitated at the door at the last second. It was making You Miao anxious watching him, and he wanted nothing more than to go up and stab the man to death with his dagger. Moments later, something was shouted outside, to which the guard answered and pulled a saber from around his waist as he turned.

"*Now*!" roared Zhao Chao.

You Miao realized that this guard was probably going to kill the two of them or take them outside as hostages, so when else should they act if not now? With the dagger in hand, You Miao charged forward. The guard had only just raised a leg when Zhao Chao lunged at him from the side with a furious shout.

The guard was taken aback when he saw the two had somehow broken free of their bondage, and You Miao seized this very moment to launch his attack and ram the dagger right into his chest.

The guard let out a roar. The dagger had penetrated the Barbarian's chest, but it didn't pierce his heart. Blood spurted like mad from where it had gotten stuck between his ribs and sprayed all over You Miao as he was smacked away by the Barbarian's backhand. Convulsing in pain, his head rang after being struck by a palm the size of an alms bowl.

"Die!" Zhao Chao shouted again in rage and leapt to tackle the guard from behind.

But the guard was like a crazed tiger now. He spun around to grab Zhao Chao by the neck and knocked him to the ground. Zhao Chao sputtered upon impact. The guard had a chokehold on him and the large hand only squeezed ever harder, even as Zhao Chao kicked out furiously with all his might.

You Miao scrambled to his feet. From where he stood behind the guard, he saw Zhao Chao's reddening neck, and saw him mouth something to him.

"*Run…*!"

The guard threw Zhao Chao over his shoulder brutally. Zhao Chao crashed into a corner. He hadn't eaten much for days, so he lacked the energy to even get to his feet. With a chest drenched in blood, the guard brandished his long saber and lunged at Zhao Chao.

"Ahh—!" You Miao yelled furiously as he charged with abandon.

Just as Zhao Chao was about to be cleaved in half by the Barbarian blade, You Miao clung to the Barbarian, and the Barbarian was instantly pulled to the ground. He flipped around and kicked You Miao right in the neck. You Miao heaved loudly, but still he held onto that leg in a death grip. Zhao Chao convulsed in pain in the corner, and as he arduously got up, one of his hands groped around randomly.

The Barbarian's second kick landed on You Miao's face, causing his vision to go dark. The third kick landed on his chest. At this point, You Miao only had one thought on his mind—*I'm going to die, but even then, I won't let go*.

You Miao was hanging on with his last remaining breath, but just then, Zhao Chao's hand found a rock. He lunged forward and smashed it into the Barbarian's face repeatedly, maniacally, without even looking. The Barbarian struggled to get up, but Zhao Chao had pinned the hand holding the saber.

The Barbarian convulsed as Zhao Chao struck violently, again and again. Then, Zhao Chao grabbed the hilt of the dagger still protruding from his chest and brutally twisted it. Now at death's door, the Barbarian let out a crazed yell, his legs kicking so hard and so furiously that You Miao almost perished.

The rock was raised then brought down; raised then brought down. Until, at last, the Barbarian stopped moving.

Zhao Chao continued his assault without pause, repeating the motion over a dozen times, but through it all, the Barbarian never moved again. His

eyes had popped out of their sockets and were now drooping down his face, dragging with them a mush of brain matter. The pink mixed with red as blood slowly began to pool.

You Miao lay sprawled on the ground, his head ringing and nausea shaking him.

Zhao Chao held him up and anxiously yelled in his ears, patting his face. You Miao opened his eyes with difficulty. The faraway sounds seemed to gradually return, the voices alternatingly near and far, drifting in and out.

"I haven't eaten," Zhao Chao said. "I didn't have the energy…"

"Is he dead…?" You Miao asked.

"As dead as he can be…" Zhao Chao replied.

Both of them were soaked in blood. Zhao Chao pulled out the dagger from the Barbarian's body and said, "Let's get out of here…"

"I'm done…" You Miao said. "You hurry and get out of here…"

"You can't die here!" Zhao Chao's voice roared in his ears.

Some strength returned to You Miao, and with Zhao Chao's help, he got to his feet and the two stumbled as they pushed open the door, subsequently crashing into the snow.

There was not a single soul outside. In the distance by the campfire lay several Barbarian corpses. The world was quiet and at peace. Zhao Chao swallowed a few bites of snow before he pushed up again, and half-holding You Miao, the two dizzy-headed youths ran without any sense of direction to get out of the village. They fell a few times during their escape, but they promptly got back to their feet. Zhao Chao's arm was wound around You Miao's waist the entire time, just below the ribs, pulling him along as they ran for their lives.

"Where is everybody?" You Miao wondered.

"Don't know…" Zhao Chao replied. "Maybe the government officers got to them… We gotta go find a horse…"

The two fled to the village entrance. From beyond it there came an angry shout, followed immediately by an arrow. Zhao Chao tackled You Miao to the ground, protecting him beneath his own body as two Barbarians yelled from behind them and ran over with their long sabers raised.

“Don’t look…” Zhao Chao said.

Lying face down in the snow, You Miao felt nothing but cold on his front —but on his back, he could feel Zhao Chao’s heartbeat.

“Are we going to die…?” You Miao asked weakly.

Zhao Chao didn’t answer.

Yet in the distance, all voices came to an abrupt stop. Another arrow flew from the side and pierced the Barbarian closest to them through the chest, bringing with it a splash of blood as it penetrated the neck of the other pursuer behind. Two pursuing troopers, one in the front and one in the back, screamed at the same time as they fell to the snowy ground. Zhao Chao panted heavily and tried to pull You Miao to his feet.

A man leapt over the snow mound at the village entrance, letting arrow after arrow fly, shooting down another two pursuers who came close.

“Don’t worry, it’s our rescuer!” Zhao Chao exclaimed.

You Miao scrambled upright; his eyes were so swollen that he could barely open them. Zhao Chao was taller than You Miao by half a head, and he stood in front of him protectively. You Miao peeked over his shoulders and saw a towering figure.

The man wore a gray wolf pelt coat, an iron battle-skirt lined with fragmented scales, and scaled leather battle boots. He pulled an arrow from the quiver on his back, nocked it onto the bow, and loosed the string. The shot was in one smooth motion, fast as lightning, felling the Barbarians that were rushing toward them.

“Go!” shouted the man.

“Li Zhifeng?!” You Miao cried.

Li Zhifeng turned and glanced at him. Shooting as he retreated, he shielded the other two as they went around the snow mound. You Miao

recognized him, albeit arduously, through the cracks of his obstructed vision. He moved his lips, yet no sound came out.

Another man's voice came from the distance. "We'll cut our way through there!"

"They've already escaped!" Li Zhifeng shouted.

"Let's go right now!"

"Their main force will find us real soon!"

"Everyone, on your horses!"

"Zhao-gongzi!"

Zhao Chao snapped out of it and cried, "Lin Fei!"

A military man came dashing forward and bent one knee to the ground, speaking rapidly, "I am the Captain of Yanbian, Lin Fei—"

"Now's not the time!" Zhao Chao cut him off immediately. "Let's go!"

Li Zhifeng shot down the last two enemies as the warhorses whinnied in the background, then he spun around and helped You Miao up onto a horse before leaping and hopping on himself as well, slipping right behind You Miao.

He squeezed the sides of the horse with his legs. "Hyah—!"

Dozens of warhorses broke into a brisk run. The world was swirling around You Miao—he'd never imagined the one who'd rescue him would be Li Zhifeng! He reached out and hugged Li Zhifeng around the neck as frigid winds blew sharply around them. Li Zhifeng pulled open his wolf pelt coat and pressed You Miao hard into his embrace. Amid the bumping of the ride, he lowered his head and gently brushed his lips against You Miao's forehead.

Zhao Chao shouted in the distance, "The enemy is catching up! What's your name?"

Lin Fei answered instead. "He's a Quanrong! You-gongzi's servant! He was the one who informed us and told us to give chase outside the city!"

“There’s too many of them!” someone shouted.

The group yelled their exchange as they rode on their madly dashing warhorses, but Li Zhifeng didn’t speak a word.

“Why did you come back?” asked an exhausted You Miao.

The wind howled and the snow fell with furious abandon, but the snowflakes were gentle when they drifted onto their bodies. Li Zhifeng answered him in a low voice.

“I missed you.”

CHAPTER 6

Arrows rained, and the Barbarians' voices traveled over on the wind.

"Watch out for the arrows!" Lin Fei shouted. "They'll catch up to us!"

But the Barbarian troop had already done so.

"Split up! Let's go separate ways!" Zhao Chao yelled.

"To the north! Enter Yanbian!" Lin Fei shouted.

Li Zhifeng let out a stifled grunt.

"We'll lead them away!" Zhao Chao shouted. "Quanrong! Take him and run to the south! Head for the official road! Once you enter the border of Liang Prefecture, you'll be safe!"

Li Zhifeng's warhorse made a sharp turn, and You Miao peeked out from the wolf-pelt robe. He saw Zhao Chao and Lin Feng luring hundreds of Barbarians away with a troop of soldiers. Zhao Chao's voice rang in his ears.

"You Miao! Take care!"

With You Miao in tow, Li Zhifeng guided the horse to dash into a patch of woods in the west, then turned around to charge out from the south onto the official road. As they galloped wildly in the vast winter snowfield, their pursuers gradually fell behind until they disappeared without a trace.

Having ridden on a strapping horse for an entire day, You Miao was starving and drowsy. He leaned heavily into Li Zhifeng's arms and slept the entire way until Li Zhifeng's voice came. It wasn't loud, but it was clear.

"We're here. You can go now."

You Miao opened his eyes. At the end of the official highway was a small checkpoint[30] that was half-buried in snow. Suddenly, the warmth behind his body dropped. Li Zhifeng fell from the horse, collapsing onto the snow

without a sound. The movement startled the horse, and it threw back its head and cried before dragging You Miao along as it dashed forward.

"Li Zhifeng!" You Miao cried.

The horse continued to gallop, taking You Miao miles away. He kept struggling hard against it until he also fell into the snow. He turned and ran toward Li Zhifeng. When he got to him, You Miao saw that there was an arrow nailed to the small of Li Zhifeng's back—his robe was torn there and stained by blood, turning a purplish black in color. You Miao dropped to his knees in the snow and flipped Li Zhifeng over, shaking him violently.

"Wake up, you can't die… You can't die!" You Miao yelled into his ears. "You bastard, you cost me two hundred and fifty silver, I'm telling you!"

Li Zhifeng was gasping, his breathing harsh and difficult. You Miao bent to his chest and confirmed Li Zhifeng's heart was still beating. A moment later, he felt Li Zhifeng's large hand pet his head.

You Miao looked up and met Li Zhifeng's gaze with visible trepidation. Li Zhifeng's eyes softened.

"Hang in there," You Miao said. "I'll go find help! I'll go call for help!"

Li Zhifeng coughed uncontrollably in response. You Miao rose to his feet and stared into the distance. Who knows if there would be anyone guarding that checkpoint, with it buried in so much snow right now. The horse was also looking back at them from the far distance.

"Is anybody around?!" You Miao shouted.

He put Li Zhifeng's arm over his own shoulder, and using all of his strength, he pulled him up by the waist. Li Zhifeng was practically as heavy as a mountain, so much so that You Miao was nearly crushed by the weight. And it was like this that You Miao, with his boyish stature, wobblily and unsteadily dragged this full-grown man in the snow.

"Is anybody around—?!"

You Miao's voice echoed and fluttered in the wind. Bits of snow flew into Li Zhifeng's long, loose hair before scattering into the wind. Then, the snow stopped.

“Who goes there?!”

Someone rode out from the checkpoint. It was an officer—they were saved.

The words “Zheng Liang Pass” were stamped in large letters on the massive boulder before the checkpoint—the very first checkpoint in the north within the borders of the Great Wall. Once crossed, they would be in the Guandong region and official Han territory of the northeast. It was midwinter right now, near the end of the year, so there were only a handful of old soldiers guarding the pass under the name plaque. Further in were Guandong’s enlistment camps, and to the east was the border of Liang Prefecture.

The Tianqi soldiers led You Miao and Li Zhifeng to a small house within the pass to let them rest. The fire inside blazed merrily and melted away the snow on their bodies into water that dripped all over the ground. Li Zhifeng lay in bed, unmoving. The old soldiers were experienced in treating arrow injuries, and someone came over with a plate of heated alcohol.

“Move! Outta the way!” someone said.

“Is he gonna die?” You Miao asked anxiously.

“He’ll be fine!” the soldiers replied. “Go out and play, kid. There’s nothing for you to do here! He’s just dizzy from blood loss!”

“I thought he was gonna die!” You Miao exclaimed.

“Nothing for you to do here—”

The soldiers all burst out laughing. Someone came in twirling a small knife, winding bandages around it as he did so.

“Heh, we’ve got a real man here. Really hangin’ in there, aren’t ya?”

You Miao was kneeling next to the bed. He caught Li Zhifeng’s hand and said, “How could you tell me to go on by myself…?”

“Your little lover, eh?” a sly soldier teased. “A simple arrow wound, and you guys make it sound like it’s a life and death separation.”

Li Zhifeng remained stoic. Another soldier said, “Hold him down. We’re gonna pull the arrow out now!”

With a resounding crack, the arrow was snapped with brute force. Li Zhifeng’s eyes stayed on You Miao, however, and did not blink once. Another man dug into Li Zhifeng’s back and cut out the iron arrowhead. It dropped to the ground with a *clank*. Another old soldier stepped forward and poured the alcohol over the gaping wound. Throughout it all, Li Zhifeng only tightened his grip as he frowned with pursed lips.

“Good man!”

The soldiers administered the medicinal powder for physical injuries before they began to heavily wrap Li Zhifeng in bandages.

“Get up,” said the captain.

Li Zhifeng pushed himself up against the bed, and You Miao finally relaxed when he saw he was really all right.

The captain had noticed the tattoos on Li Zhifeng’s neck when dressing his wounds, and he asked with a frown, “You’re Quanrong?”

The room fell silent when the captain voiced his question. The soldiers all stepped back and rested their hands on the hilts of the swords hanging at their waists.

“Don’t attack him!” You Miao immediately interjected. “He’s my servant! I can swear he won’t kill anyone! Leave him alone!”

The captain didn’t say anything else and tossed the bandages onto the bed. He turned to leave, chuckling as he exited. “Heh, how funny. We saved a Quanrong dog today.”

The soldiers all went, leaving only You Miao and Li Zhifeng in the room.

You Miao picked up the roll of bandages and measured it against Li Zhifeng for a moment before he started to wrap it around his waist. Li Zhifeng still hadn’t uttered a single word, and only sat there in silence.

“I’ll go out there and explain to them later,” You Miao said. “Don’t worry, they won’t do anything to you.”

Li Zhifeng made a sound of assent.

“If arrow injuries weren’t a big deal, why did you lie to me?” You Miao continued.

Li Zhifeng finally moved his lips to speak. “You didn’t tell me to follow you.”

You Miao found this hilarious, but at the same time, it made his heart clench. He pulled the bandage taut and tied it, and the sudden pressure made Li Zhifeng flex his fit upper body. You Miao tossed him his fur robe to have him cover himself before he headed out to search for the captain for a chat.

The skies were clear again. The captain and several of the soldiers were standing in the snow, huddled like they were in discussion. You Miao walked over.

“Gege, I have something to say,” You Miao said.

The group watched him suspiciously. You Miao cupped his fist in salutation. The captain was a slim and fit man in his forties, and he cupped his fist as well to return the courtesy. During his time in the capital, You Miao had long since mastered the art of eloquence and knew what to say depending on to whom he was speaking. He knew that these soldier types preferred people coming on soft rather than hard; it would be completely useless if he tried to use his status as a young master to suppress them or used money to command them. And so, You Miao chose honesty.

You Miao told them everything. He told them how he got Li Zhifeng from Li Yan, how he brought Li Zhifeng along to the border to release him, how he was mugged by Barbarians on the road, and how Li Zhifeng had brought soldiers to his rescue…

One of the old soldiers chuckled. “Well, he’s a loyal one.”

The captain nodded contemplatively. But just as he was about to speak, a messenger on horseback arrived at Zheng Liang Pass.

“Message for Captain Wang—!”

The messenger was dressed in the Yanbian army's uniform. He hopped off the horse to hand over the letter. Captain Wang opened it and only gave it a skim before he ordered You Miao, "Come with me."

Once You Miao was taken to the Military Council room, Captain Wang said, "Yanbian has sent word to search for the two of you."

You Miao was secretly delighted; this meant Zhao Chao had safely returned to Yanbian.

"What about Zhao Chao?" You Miao asked. "Has he escaped danger too?"

Captain Wang cast a glance at You Miao, seeming a bit confused. "Yes."

"Then let me respond to his letter," You Miao said.

"When it comes to Quanrong slaves, it generally has been a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of deal with the government," Captain Wang said. "That man is a good one, bringing you all the way here while hanging on by a thread. Back when our two nations clashed and we fought the Quanrong, both sides had their own authorities to obey. Although it was nothing that could be helped, when I think of the brothers who died by Quanrong hands, I still… What's your relationship with the Third…with Zhao-gongzi?"

You Miao was hunched over a desk writing his response letter. He nodded and looked up. "What?"

Captain Wang showed him the original letter. "Zhao Chao mentioned that you're like a dear little brother to him, and that we must search for you."

You Miao flashed a smile. Since Zhao Chao said it first, You Miao could cheekily call them brothers. Thus, he slathered his letter with affection, filling its content with sweetness; the gist of it was that he had escaped danger, that he wouldn't forget their shared joy and miseries, that he would be heading off to Liang City to find his way home, and other such things.

Captain Wang stood beside him and watched him write. In awe of his beautiful handwriting, he praised him before he said, "The merchant caravan only just passed Zheng Liang Pass, heading southeast. If you go now, you can still catch them."

“Excellent, I’ll leave right away,” You Miao said.

You Miao felt for the personal seal he had in his robes, but it had already been lost, so he instead had to press a fingerprint using cinnabar. He handed the letter to Captain Wang and asked to borrow a horse-drawn carriage. Captain Wang added an escort to his entourage, and they hurried toward Liang City through the night. There was an old rickety carriage sitting in front of Zheng Liang Pass—it was one a princess had ridden in decades ago during her diplomatic marriage procession. The escort soldier drove the carriage, and while it was a crude and simple vehicle, You Miao felt so much more comfortable as he rode it leaning against Li Zhifeng. It was as if the moment they were back inside the border, the world once again became peaceful and safe.

At the end of the day, this was Han territory. He never felt this way before, but after this trip beyond the Great Wall, suddenly everyone he met was good and every landscape he saw was beautiful when he returned to the Central Plains. Seeing Li Zhifeng still gazing out the window, You Miao’s thoughts strayed back to him. Outside the Wall, You Miao was a foreigner. Li Zhifeng must feel the same way when in the Central Plains—never mind that he was also of slave status.

“I told you to go home because I had originally wanted you to leave the Central Plains; this place of sadness for you,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng glanced at You Miao.

“Won’t you miss home now that you’re back in the Central Plains?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng shook his head.

“Just as well,” You Miao said. “Why don’t you follow me from now on, then?”

Li Zhifeng took something out from his breast pocket and handed it to You Miao. It was his slave deed.

“You saved my life,” You Miao said. “Had you not come, Zhao Chao and I might’ve died. Let’s call ourselves brothers from now on; you’re not a slave anymore.”

You Miao refused to take the deed, but Li Zhifeng was insistent.

"Protecting you is my duty; no matter how much you ask of me, it's no burden," Li Zhifeng said. "The Quanrong don't have a home to begin with, so there is no such thing as homesickness."

You Miao made a noise of acknowledgment and hugged Li Zhifeng around the waist, burying himself in his embrace. Li Zhifeng's hat was quite peculiar—it was almost like half of a wolf's head, and two large fangs covered his tenacious, handsome face. He seemed a completely different person than who he once was.

You Miao curled into Li Zhifeng's embrace and blearily fell asleep with his arms circled around his waist as Li Zhifeng held him with his strong arms. The last thing You Miao thought of before he drifted off was, *This guy ain't bad. I literally bought treasure for only two hundred and fifty silver.*

The horse-drawn carriage reached Great Liang City after a day of travel. The soldier drove them to the local government building, and they found the merchant caravan from the capital still hanging around the city. Hao Sanqian had luckily escaped, but the caravan, having lost Young Master You, was already in a panicked mess. The situation at the time had been chaotic; many drivers had lost their lives, and anyone who could flee had done so. What was the point of money if they had no lives with which to spend it?

After fleeing to Great Liang City, Hao Sanqian had been stuffing money into the local government's hands to beg them to search for You Miao. However, it was at least several days' worth of driving distance between Great Liang City, Zhen Liang Pass, and Yanbian, and much time was delayed passing information back and forth. The merchants had all been burning with worry, so even when You Miao came back, they still appeared rather on edge.

You Miao didn't mind, however, and only laughed it off. "Don't worry, all is well now that I'm back. I've caused all of you trouble this time."

The merchants all sighed in relief. Hao Sanqian couldn't resist complaining and crying, talking about how much of the cargo was lost, how

they made the young master suffer so many hardships, that he was likely done for when they get back. You Miao spent a great deal of time consoling him, knowing that it was the merchant's nature to seek profit and avoid harm, so he couldn't really blame them.

The caravan spent a day reorganizing themselves, preparing to leave the next day.

While Great Liang City couldn't compare to Yanbian's bustling markets, it was nonetheless a vital area of the Guandong region. Inside the inn, You Miao wolfed down more than half a pound of hand-pulled mutton, a large handful of beef liver, and a large bowl of horse milk tea before he finally felt alive again. Dangling a bunch of grapes from one hand, he crossed his legs and ate as he admired the landscape. Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng was squatting outside the eatery, engrossed in eating a massive bowl of lamb soup and pita bread.

The merchants all called him a loyal servant. Great Liang City was the last stop before the frontier, and merchants from all over gathered here, so news from various regions drifted into You Miao's ears every now and then. Most of them were saying that the northern Barbarians had risen, that there was more and more unrest troubling the border, and that business would probably go downhill in the next few years.

You Miao rose to his feet, his hands crossed in his sleeves. Li Zhifeng put aside his half-eaten bowl to get up too, but You Miao stopped him. "Keep eating."

"I'm done," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao giggled. "Just eat. You can accompany me better on a full stomach."

Li Zhifeng picked up his bowl and dug into it anew. As he ate, You Miao leaned over and petted his wolf-headed hat and laughed when Li Zhifeng looked up to glance at him.

You Miao took Li Zhifeng along to cross through the various markets to shop for clothes. The place was filled with a diverse assortment of silks and brocades from the west and south, and their prices were far higher than they

were in Jiangbei. But there was also much more variety when it came to ready-made clothes, and they were not restricted to only one style. The weather was going to get warmer when they headed further south, so there was no need to keep wearing fur robes. The set of wolf-pelt robes and hat that Li Zhifeng had on even had a tail hanging from the back coat. There was no way You Miao could bring him home like this, so the man had to change clothes.

"This one, then." You Miao picked out an indigo blue robe intricately embroidered with clear skies and clouds. It was done using a secret method where the needlework was invisible, and the robe made the wearer look energetic. You Miao himself was luxuriously dressed, so he couldn't have his entourage looking too shabby.

Without a word, Li Zhifeng folded his battle-skirt and removed the lined jacket, revealing his tanned and toned muscles. His body was slim but hardened, like it was made of iron. He put on the single-layered robe and tied the belt, consequently causing quite a stir from the women all around.

"A slave…" someone whispered, having noticed the tattoo on Li Zhifeng's neck.

"A Barbarian?"

"How audacious, bringing a Barbarian inside the border without even fettering his hands and feet…"

"I wonder which house this young master is from…"

You Miao ignored the whispers and reached out to help Li Zhifeng fix his collar, covering his tattoo. "Once we get to my house, you can't say a single wrong thing."

"Hn." Li Zhifeng nodded.

"We'll have to get our stories straight. Tell them you were a gift from Li Yan to me, and don't say anything else unnecessary."

"Understood," Li Zhifeng replied obediently.

"If they ask where you're from, tell them you're Han," You Miao added.

Li Zhifeng didn't respond, and something else came to You Miao's mind. Even the Han say one must not forget their forebearers and regard foe as father; it seemed to be the same for the Quanrong.

Li Zhifeng probably wouldn't be willing to say he was a Han. After all, Quanrong blood flowed in his veins. Moreover, his brows and his eyes really didn't resemble a Han's, either.

You Miao was just about to say something else when, surprisingly, Li Zhifeng replied, "All right."

"Forget it," You Miao said. "Might as well tell the truth. I'll think of a way to get around Dad."

You Miao hooked Li Zhifeng's index and middle fingers with his own and swung their hands to and fro as they left the clothes shop to head back to the caravan. All expenses within Great Liang City were counted on the caravan's accounts. Many days passed this way before the merchant caravan departed once more, heading to the last stop of this winter expedition—Jiangbei.

The Jiangnan and Jiangbei regions, the south and north of the Yangtze River respectively, were divided into Liu Prefecture, Yang Prefecture, Su Prefecture and others. Their journey southward took another dozen days. The climate grew warmer as the band came closer to the Yangtze River, and while there was still the occasional snowfall, there was rain mixed in with the precipitation, soft and swirling over the bright green hills. It was quite the opposite of the frontier's blowing blizzards and winds that cut like the blade. Jiangbei's winter was a wondrous sight of the mortal realm.

"Once we get home, you have to address my dad as 'laoye' when you see him, understand?" You Miao instructed.

"Okay," Li Zhifeng replied.

"We're only staying for a month, so don't start any fights with the servants…"

"Hn."

“The You Residence isn’t like the one back at the capital; some servants can’t enter the chambers. You’re my man, so you can enter my room, but you can’t enter the main hall, and you can’t wander into other areas, either…”

“Understood.”

Throughout the entire trip, You Miao repeated his commands tirelessly in Li Zhifeng’s ears, and in between, he also talked quite a bit about the matters at home. He couldn’t boast and brag to those wastrel elites in the capital and had to conceal his wealth, but he could do so a little in front of his own servant.

“In any case,” You Miao concluded, “not even the current emperor has experienced all that we use and consume. Following me is fortune you earned from your past life.”

“Mn.” Li Zhifeng’s lips curled upward as he gazed out of the coach, looking happy.

“Have you ever been to Liu Prefecture?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng shook his head.

The caravan stopped at Jiang Prefectural City, and Hao Sanqian went to hail another carriage to send You Miao to the You Residence in Pei County.

The hillsides along the way were a field of dark green; the tea farmers were trying to pick the last harvest of winter tea sprouts before the great frost. The land stretched for hundreds of thousands of acres and was littered with thousands of tea estates.

“Look at these hills, this land, this river,” You Miao said as he leaned by the wide-open windows of the carriage, sounding quite pleased with a broad smile on his face. “The trees planted on the hills, the fish raised in the rivers, the fowl, the beasts, the flowers, the birds, the insects… They all belong to my family. They’re all mine.”

Shock colored Li Zhifeng’s eyes, and he nodded slowly. You Miao had one leg resting on Li Zhifeng’s thigh as the carriage went and stopped intermittently. The foggy air of the tea hills had only just risen, and the

roads were quite wet from the recent rain. Each breath of air was filled with the freshness of the wild. Compared to the noisy and populous capital and the rolling yellow sands of the northern borderlands, this place was practically heaven on earth—a piece of paradise in the mortal realm.

The horse carriage stopped by the roadside around noontime, and the driver beckoned You Miao to alight for lunch. There were four varieties of steamed tea, two kinds of fried rice, as well as freshly-fried prawns and thinly sliced winter whitefish rolled in egg and flour and deep-fried in hot oil to seven parts golden, three parts crispy. It melted in the mouth. This lunch put You Miao in a fantastic mood.

You Miao had been away from home for three years, and it had been too long since he had the good dishes of Liu Prefecture. You Miao turned to Li Zhifeng and said, "Later, when we get home, we'll get to eat way better than this."

Li Zhifeng nodded. He was squatting by the entrance of the eatery eating his wholly fresh and flavorful fishball soup out of a massive bowl.

The boss lady came to pour tea for You Miao. She said with a smile, "It's been years since You-shaoye has come home."

"Ain't that the truth." You Miao smiled as he took the teacup.

Sunshower Maojian tea leaves floated up and down the porcelain cup painted with petals, and the fragrance of tea spilled into the air. You Miao had always been a friendly soul, plus he was handsome, so all the nearby tea farmers doted on him when they worked for the You family. Today, however, the boss lady looked as though she was withholding words. Still soaked in the freshness of homecoming, You Miao didn't notice.

"This is my clerk at the capital, an honest man," You Miao said, pointing at Li Zhifeng.

The boss lady nodded with a smile. "Do you know why Master You has asked you to come home, You-shaoye?"

You Miao pondered for a moment. "It's either to have me marry or have me take over Sunshower Tea Estate. What else could it be?"

While his father had been adamant in sending You Miao to the capital to study and land a government position, it wouldn't be a reach for him to have changed his mind and want to keep You Miao in Jiangbei.

You Miao gave a bubbly laugh. "When I take over the estate in the future, things will remain as they should. I won't raise a coin of your rent, don't worry."

"Shaoye is someone who values past friendships," the boss lady replied. "It's our good fortune to be able to follow him."

You Miao nodded, and the boss lady went to take the laundry out to dry. She sighed as she did so, and Li Zhifeng, who had been eating his noodles, sensed her affliction and lifted his eyes to look at her.

After lunch, You Miao ordered the horse carriage to return. They were less than ten miles away from Sunshower Tea Estate, and with the longing sentiment of a drifting son filling You Miao, he planned to simply walk the entire way home.

The ground was wet, so Li Zhifeng offered, "Shaoye, let me carry you."

Not holding back, You Miao jumped onto his back and let Li Zhifeng carry him as they slowly walked. There were people driving ox carts passing by along the way, and You Miao would call to them. In turn, the passersby would return the greeting when they saw him.

"Oh, it's You-shaoye."

"You-shaoye is back—!"

"Why not ride a carriage?"

To which You Miao would reply with a smile, "Just checking things out at home."

All of You Miao's luggage had been stolen, and the only possession he had was Li Zhifeng. They chatted and laughed the entire way, and it wasn't until Sunshower Tea Estate revealed all of itself upon the hillside that You Miao hopped down from Li Zhifeng's back.

It was nearly evening, and two boy servants were sweeping the grounds. They saw him coming from afar, and one of the servants was about to go

inside to announce his arrival. However, the other grabbed hold of him and waved.

You Miao finally sensed something was wrong. All of a sudden, all the details he hadn't paid attention to were coming to mind. What was going on? He had come all the way to Pei County, yet no one from home had come to welcome him. The two boy servants bowed with their hands cupped in tucked sleeves.

"Shaoye."

"Shaoye is back."

"I'm back," You Miao said. "How come no one's come to receive me? Where's Uncle Hu?"

You Miao headed toward the main entrance. One of the boy attendants was dozing off, but he woke with a start when he saw You Miao had returned. The other two servants ran up and kicked him.

"Have you lost your mind?! The young master is back!" They then turned back to You Miao, and one of them explained with a smile, "He's new."

"It's fine," You Miao said. "Where's the sedan? How come one hasn't been prepared?"

The one servant threw a look at his two companions, the group of them looking hesitant. One of them replied, "To answer shaoye, master and the… the… They went out. The little sedan is on the estate grounds, I'll go call for it right now."

"Is Uncle Hu around?" You Miao asked. "Tell him to make a name badge for this man," he said as he pointed at Li Zhifeng. "This is Li Zhifeng. He's the one who's been accompanying me. It's too cold, so I didn't have Shiqi-er come back with me."

"Yes, sir." The boy servants nodded, and one of them asked, "Shaoye has…no luggage?"

You Miao laughed. "I got mugged on the road! More scare than harm done, though."

The three boy servants exchanged looks, then one of them suddenly said, “Shaoye, Uncle Hu has returned home.”

“Returned home?” You Miao was confused.

“Yes,” the boy servant replied. “Retired. A new butler called Lin Si has replaced him. The second butler Uncle Wang has left too. Right now, the new accountant hired by Ma-yiniang[31] has been managing the money.”

How come there wasn’t any letter telling him the butlers had changed? Even the accountant had changed. You Miao tucked his hands in his sleeves.

“Never mind. Since the sedan isn’t here yet, I’ll go up myself.”

A spirit screen[32] stood before the main entrance of the grand estate, and carrying a small bag, Li Zhifeng followed after You Miao to go around the wall and start the hike up the hill. It was good to train the body every so often. Dusk had descended and the mist in the distance had dispersed, allowing a ray of the setting sun to peek through the cracks of the rolling clouds and dye their edges golden. Thousands upon thousands of tea trees across the hills were bathed in the colors of twilight, sprouting fondness inside You Miao’s heart for his hometown.

You Miao called out with a laugh as he crossed through the second entrance of the estate, “I’m back!”

The few maids who were drawing water from the well glanced at You Miao, and they looked taken aback—a little nervous, even. It was a long while before one of the maids curtseyed and greeted in a small voice.

“Welcome back, shaoye.”

You Miao’s heart sank. He finally realized something *was* wrong.

“Wow, now look who’s back.”

The voice reached them before the woman herself appeared a moment later. She was dressed in a long lotus-colored dress with a pink flower pin decorating her hair. Her face was caked with powder and rouge.

This was the little concubine of You Miao’s father, surnamed Ma.[33] She was the one the boy servant had referred to as “Ma-yiniang.” After You

Miao's mother passed away, Ma-yiniang had given You Dechuan neither son nor daughter. As the eldest principal son, You Miao treated her with courtesy, but never interacted with her more than necessary.

There was another woman standing beside Ma-yiniang. She was wrapped in a dress embroidered with the delicate shades of the open skies, and wore a fox fur scarf around her collar. Her hair was done in a loose tilted bun, held up with a jade pin from which dangled a jade pendant foiled in gold. The pendant swayed this way and that as it gleamed in the light of the setting sun. She had crow's feet stamped around her eyes, and no red on her lips. Judging by this woman's appearance, she was more or less fifty years of age. Her presence emanated an oppressive aura. You Miao could only assume that a female relative was visiting, since he had never met this woman before. But just as he was about to make his greeting, the woman spoke up first.

Without a shred of courtesy in her tone, she questioned Ma-yiniang. "*This* is You Miao?"

You Miao's eyebrows shot up, but before he even said anything, Ma-yiniang spoke up.

"This is the missus of the house, You Miao," said Ma-yiniang, her eyes on the woman. "As is proper, you will address her as Madam." She then turned to You Miao with a wide grin, watching for his reaction.

Madam?!

You Miao was completely baffled. His mom was the formal wife, *the* madam of the You House. He'd only left home for three years. Where did this madam come from? What was going on?

"Who are you?" You Miao could hardly believe it. Someone abruptly came to mind—a name his parents had uttered in the middle of their arguments when he was really young: Wang.

"You don't know me, but I know you." A faint trace of nervousness could be heard in the woman's steady voice as she said slowly, "Your mom is Qiao Ke-er. *Tsk, tsk*. Those eyes, those brows…you're practically from the same mold."

The woman's chin was tilted up, and her eyes glowed with unconcealed disgust. But You Miao was a bit taller, so he eyed her down.

"Madam Wang," You Miao greeted drily. "A pleasure. Why have you come to my house? Should I be calling you Wang-yiniang now?"

Madam Wang's face instantly fell, and she gave a hard *humph* in response.

Ma-yiniang answered instead. "She's the missus now, You Miao. You'll have to—"

"Forget it," Madam Wang cut in and stopped Ma-yiniang, stating coldly, "Wait until his dad comes home and have him say it in person."

You Miao didn't have the patience to keep talking with Madam Wang, either. He asked her maid directly, "When is my dad coming back?"

The maid curtseyed nervously, then looked at Madam Wang. Ma-yiniang interjected and answered in her stead. "Your dad and the elder young master went to Yang Prefecture to check accounts…"

A loud buzzing noise filled You Miao's head before she could finish her sentence, and all at once, the world spun.

The elder young master…

You Miao snorted. What Ma-yiniang just said was functionally an attack on both his person and his mind. Instantly, You Miao understood what had caused the odd changes at home. In the three years he'd been studying at the capital, not only had his father remarried, but he had also legitimized Madam Wang as his legal wife.

What did a new son joining the family imply…?

You Miao immediately turned to leave, with Ma-yiniang behind him covering her mouth in mirth. However, Madam Wang wouldn't allow him to go so easily.

"Stop," she said.

You Miao's face darkened. "What?"

“That man is with you?” Madam Wang asked. “Why doesn’t he know etiquette at all? I heard it was Shiqi-er who went to the capital with you—”

“Li Zhifeng never formally entered the family,” You Miao said. “Could Madam be thinking of punishing him with a round of beatings to undercut my authority?”

Madam Wang certainly had the mind to do so. If she couldn’t keep You Miao’s head down, then at the very least she could beat up his servants. However, You Miao had guessed her intentions beforehand.

“Li Zhifeng, tell them,” You Miao said with a wide grin. “Tell them how many people you’ve killed in the past.”

Li Zhifeng stared at the giant celadon vat in the yard. Within it, there were vibrantly colored goldfish swimming to and fro as the water reflected the clear skies of the horizon. It was a while before Li Zhifeng answered.

“A hundred and fifteen. Sixteen Han, seventy-one Tartar, one Quanrong, two Wudi, one Xianbei, four Jie, seven Hun, and one child.”

Then, he lifted his eyes to gaze at You Miao.

No one spoke a word. Judging by Ma-yiniang’s expression, she was obviously grumbling on the inside.

You Miao himself was shocked, though he kept a straight face. These people probably thought Li Zhifeng was joking, but based on the man’s character, he wouldn’t lie to him.

“Didn’t you…come to the Central Plains around age fifteen?” You Miao asked.

“Those were all kills from before I crossed the border,” Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao started to laugh, arching his brows at Madam Wang. He watched for her reaction while he continued to talk to Li Zhifeng.

“While you’re here living in this house, if anyone wants to hit you or apprehend you, you can ignore them completely unless I say otherwise. If anyone dares to raise a hand to you, you can retaliate. Just don’t kill them and it’ll be fine.”

“Understood,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Let’s go,” You Miao said, chuckling.

Madam Wang’s expression was gloomy and unreadable, but she didn’t dare to recklessly say anything more. You Miao and Li Zhifeng left, going down the corridor of the second entrance. As soon as they passed the corridors, You Miao’s expression darkened, the smile vanishing from his face. Li Zhifeng remained the same as he followed behind You Miao.

You Miao walked for a small stretch before he leaned against one of the pillars and let out a sigh. His head was a tangled mess, and he needed to rest a bit and process everything.

“Let’s go.” You Miao said with a cracked voice.

As he led Li Zhifeng through the garden, a maid holding a cat opened her mouth to speak, but then held back. You Miao stopped.

“Shaoye, you live in the east wing,” another maid said.

“Heh.” You Miao smirked instead of throwing a fit. “Even my room changed?”

The eldest principal son lived in the main building, the second son lived in the east wing, and the women, apart from the legal wife, lived in the west wing. Who would dare switch You Miao’s room without You Dechuan’s orders? They had moved his things to the east wing, which meant he had been demoted to the status of second son.

You Miao didn’t blow up, however. He didn’t leave, either. His father wasn’t home, so there was no point in throwing a fit; he would only make a spectacle of himself in front of everyone. He crossed through the garden of the main building regardless and glanced at what used to be his room. The parrots he’d raised in the hanging cages under the eaves, the flowers he’d planted, the goldfish he’d kept in the glass basin—everything he had three years ago was all gone, replaced by a batch of fern leaf bamboos that blocked the entrance.

You Miao kept going and arrived at the east wing. This place seemed to have been renovated; the rockery in front of the pond had new rocks

stacked, and the fences, the pillars, and the veranda were all newly painted. A row of birdcages lined just below the eaves.

His father had more or less put his heart into this, but it only maddened You Miao even more. A boy servant who used to wait on You Miao was sweeping the grounds; he went by the name Muqi. When he spotted You Miao, he quickly tossed aside the rake in his hand.

“Shaoye!” he called.

You Miao knew he must look really upset right now, and without a word, he stormed inside, slamming the door behind him.

Li Zhifeng and Muqi stood in the yard and looked at each other, both speechless for the moment.

CHAPTER 7

The interior decoration was as it used to be. Sprawled over the bed, You Miao tossed and turned as he brooded, mired in the disbelief that such a thing could happen to him.

This Madam Wang came out of nowhere; there was even an elder son he had never seen or heard of before. What was this world coming to? Could the legal eldest son be changed on a whim, and for nothing?! You Miao sat up in a fit, ready to storm to the main hall to get things squared, but then he circled his room a couple of times before abruptly sitting again. This was so much like a nightmare.

When the moon rose, Muqi knocked on the door. “Shaoye, it’s dinner time.”

You Miao was still groggy from sleep, and he felt his head splitting when he woke up. Muqi entered holding the meal box.

You Miao actually wasn’t angry anymore, and only asked dispassionately, “Where are the others? Where are Chunxiang, Mingye, and the other girls?”

“They were all reassigned to serve the elder young master,” Muqi explained. “We didn’t think shaoye would return so soon, so there aren’t too many of us assigned to the east wing yet. This lowly one will go press Butler Lin, and see when…”

“Forget it,” You Miao said. “We’ll figure it out when Dad comes back. You guys can go eat, too. No need to wait on me.”

Muqi set the dishes on the table and started the fire inside the brazier. The food was still pretty much the same as before, not a bit had been skimped on for You Miao. But it was just as he figured—there was no need for Madam Wang to cut his food short, or else she would have to be the one to explain herself when You Dechuan returned.

Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng simply unpacked and put away the small bundle bag before he went to the outer chamber to eat alongside Muqi.

Everything You Miao tasted of his dinner was bitter; for whatever reason, everything was the flavor of the current situation. You Miao barely moved his chopsticks before he went back to lying on the bed, his mind filled with thoughts he couldn't chase away. When it grew late, Muqi came in to cut the candles, extinguishing the light for bedtime. That night, the east wing was deathly quiet.

There wasn't a single servant You Miao could command when he rose the next day. In the past, there had been four maids and two boy servants in his quarters, and the yard had always been noisy with endless chatter. Now that there were only Muqi and Li Zhifeng, it felt indescribably empty.

When Muqi entered the room to attend to him, You Miao said, "Tell Li Zhifeng to come in, but don't leave, either. Close the door. Answer each of my questions."

Li Zhifeng came in to help You Miao dress, and You Miao began his questions.

"When did the madam and that pest of an elder young master move in?"

Muqi had served You Miao since the age of twelve, they had been together for at least five years. Their relationship was not the same as the other servants in the household. Muqi knew about You Miao's demotion to the second son, and now that he stayed assigned to the east wing, he was well aware that he would forever be on Young Master You Miao's boat if he didn't have any other ambitions in this life. He had to say what had to be said, and tell what needed to be told.

"They moved in two years ago," Muqi answered.

"When was the new eldest principal son appointed?"

"Last year."

"Did they invite the uncles and the elders of the clan for a toast?"

Muqi nodded, and suddenly, rage filled You Miao again. Such a huge thing, and not a single person had told him?!

"What's the name of the elder young master?" You Miao questioned.

"The elder young master's name is Hange," Muqi replied.

You Hange… You Miao understood as soon as he heard the name. His generation in the family all had the character for "water" in the second character of their names.

"My dad sired him?" You Miao asked. "How come I didn't know about it? And no one told me?"

Muqi seemed a little angry when he heard this. He contemplated briefly before answering, "Who knows? As soon as that woman entered the house, she took over everything. Uncle Wang also retired, and even the accountant changed…"

You Miao nodded slowly. At least he now knew two things: the You Clan had indeed recognized the appointment of a new legal eldest son, and that new eldest son was indeed his older brother from another mother.

When You Miao was younger, before he had left for the capital at the age of twelve, he had heard plenty about his father's affairs. Even his mother's side of the family had snitched, telling him that You Dechuan had someone else on the outside. However, it was more than normal for men to have several wives and mistresses, never mind a top wealthy merchant like You Dechuan. If You Dechuan had wanted to remarry, You Miao wouldn't have a say in the matter. But it was just so sudden that You Miao couldn't help but feel indignant.

Perhaps all those years ago, when You Dechuan wanted to send him to the capital to become an official, it was because he had this planned out in advance.

You Miao ate his breakfast absentmindedly. After the meal was over, someone came to notify him that Nanny Sun had come to see him.

Nanny Sun used to be You Miao's wet nurse, and she'd taken care of him until he was seven before she returned home. You Miao was filled with

pent-up grievances with nowhere to vent, so when he saw Nanny Sun rush in, lamenting to the heavens and the earth, his eyes grew hot immediately.

"Oh, my poor little Miao-zi…" The moment Nanny Sun came in, she hugged You Miao and started to weep.

"Don't cry!" You Miao hastily exclaimed. "Nanny, don't you cry!"

You Miao's own words sounded tearful, and he didn't dare look at Nanny Sun, who was already crying so hard her tears flooded her face, moaning "my baby" and "dear ancestors" as she sniveled and sobbed with a hand clutching her heart. The pair of old and young lamented inside the room for a while before You Miao personally brewed her a pot of tea and beckoned her to take a seat.

"It's all fate, Nanny. Don't let this wreck your health." You Miao tried to comfort her, but then breathed another deep sigh.

"When little lord uncle heard about the matter, he was furious. He went up to Yang Prefecture twice, but was blocked outside the You Clan's door both times. Later, he consulted with the elder lord uncle at Shaoyuan Tea Estate, and they came to the conclusion there was nothing they could do.[34] And so they sent me, this god-forsaken set of old bones, to deliver word that shaoye is welcome to return to Su Prefecture if he feels he can't stay here any longer."

"Never mind, forget it. My mom's dead, but Dad's still around; how can I possibly go to my maternal uncles' house?" You Miao said. "You just came from Su Prefecture, did you hear what they're saying over there?"

"Oh, nothing but the same past affairs, gosh. I didn't think that it's still not over even after suppressing them for so many years…"

You Miao had spent the entire night last night thinking, and there were some things he still didn't quite understand. Now that he heard what Nanny Sun said, he was instantly enlightened. Everything was clear to him now.

His maternal uncles had frequently reminded him of his parents' tenuous relationship. It hadn't been a union of marriage born of love, but a decision made by one of You Dechuan's uncles to have Qiao Ke-er of Shaoyuan Tea Estate marry into the You family. That year, You Dechuan made grievous

complaints toward the elders of the clan over the arrangement, and there was also talk that he had a lover. It was only because Qiao Ke-er was much too adept at conducting herself after marrying into the family that things had been peaceful all these years. You Miao's father had never sought a concubine again, and his mother also never mentioned these things in front of the young You Miao.

A few years after his mother passed away, most of the elders in the You Clan grew older as well and died off—as was natural. Thus, his father righted a marriage he had proposed before he was wed. Truly, it must've been hard for Madam Wang to have endured indignation for priorities' sake; waiting so agonizingly for You Dechuan for over a decade even after having given birth to a son. She had waited until You Dechuan's business was stabilized before she formally entered the halls and married into the family in full proper convention.

Having learned this, it wasn't like the idea of going to his maternal uncles' house never crossed You Miao's mind. It was just that he knew the current situation of Shaoyuan Tea Estate. The older uncle was a squanderer who had been frittering away the ancestors' savings, and although the little uncle was ambitious, he lacked the money. Shaoyuan Tea Estate hadn't been able to make ends meet for years. What could he possibly accomplish by going there?

Nanny Sun was still having tea in the room when Muqi-er rushed inside and signaled You Miao with his eyes.

You Miao furrowed his brow and said, "Speak if you've got something to say. Nanny isn't an outsider."

"The master and…the elder young master have returned," Muqi-er announced with a quivering voice.

When Nanny Sun heard him, her mouth dropped a bit, and her old face frowned before she started weeping again.

"I'll go see Dad," You Miao said. "Li Zhifeng, you follow me. Muqi-er, go hail for a carriage and send Nanny home."

You Miao took a deep breath and fixed his robes. Li Zhifeng had been listening to the conversation inside the room while sitting outside all this time, and now he immediately rose to his feet to follow You Miao out. Nanny Sun tottered out of the room.

Over and over again, she said to Li Zhifeng, “Where are you from? How come I’ve never seen you before? Our young master’s life is rough, you’ll have to take good care of him…”

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao comforted Nanny Sun some more before heading off. As they crossed through the corridor and came to the east wing’s yard, You Miao heard voices from outside the main building. It was his father issuing commands.

The sky was clear after the rain, but the tips of You Dechuan’s boots were still stained with mud. With his hands clasped behind him, he hiked all the way up the manor with his son You Hange in tow, and the bodyguards carrying the sedan trailed far behind the two of them.

You Miao took after his maternal uncle, whereas You Hange resembled You Dechuan very much. He had the same, hard-lined thick eyebrows that were always slightly creased, as he’d gained a temperament that was mature for his age after accompanying his mother for all these years. He bore a large forehead and equally big ears, his skin was dark and rough, and his eyes shone with a bright clarity that exuded a calculating, contemplative look.

“What are your thoughts?” You Dechuan asked.

“Dad, I think this shipment is best shipped out sooner rather than later. When the new tea enters the market at the beginning of next year, it will most likely greatly inflate in price,” You Hange answered.

You Dechuan nodded noncommittally without comment. They crossed through the second entrance and went around to enter the yard. Madam Wang came out to greet them, smiling.

“Welcome home.”

You Hange quickly bowed to greet his mother, and Madam Wang led You Dechuan inside. Still wearing a smile, she said, “You Miao arrived last

night.”

You Dechuan grunted in acknowledgment, and asked, “Everything went all right on the road?”

“I haven’t heard anything,” Madam Wang said. “He took the day to rest.”

Madam Wang personally helped You Dechuan out of his outer jacket as the maids entered in a line, carrying towels and a basin.

“I’ve prepared a table of small dishes for you three men, and heated some liquor. It’ll be perfect for catching up,” Madam Wang said.

“If You Miao is still tired, then…” You Dechuan started to say but was cut off.

“Dad.” You Miao had his hands tucked in his sleeves as he stood outside the threshold of the door. The moment he spoke, every head inside the main hall turned in his direction.

“Perfect timing.” Madam Wang smiled cheerfully. “Master was just saying he was afraid that you were—”

“You Miao,” You Dechuan called. “Perfect timing. I’ve got a few things I want to tell you.”

“‘Kay.” You Miao remained standing in the courtyard outside, watching the family of three getting on merrily, and didn’t step in.

You Hange spoke up. “Didi, you’re back.”

Based on hierarchy, You Miao should’ve been the one to greet You Hange first and address him as elder brother, as was appropriate. But You Miao didn’t give his greetings; he didn’t address Madam Wang nor did he call You Hange elder brother. You Dechuan thus looked a little gloomy.

“We’ll talk in the study,” You Dechuan said, gesturing You Miao to go on first.

As You Miao turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of Madam Wang’s triumphant smile behind his father’s back, as well as You Hange’s complicated expression.

At that moment, he suddenly realized that this pair of mother and son were also standing on thin ice, living their days in trepidation. Perhaps they weren't having a better time than he was.

The afternoon sun's rays poured through the window. As You Miao observed his father as he sat behind a working desk, an odd feeling suddenly came over him.

You Dechuan seemed to have become much gentler. When You Miao saw him in the past, his thick, hard-lined brows were always knitted, his hooked nose and thin lips appeared cool and unfeeling. The father of his past had been severe and stubborn. Now, he finally had the look of a loving patriarch.

"You bought another servant?" You Dechuan asked.

"A gift from a friend," You Miao replied.

You Miao didn't dare tell him about Li Zhifeng's background, at least not now.

"What's your name?" You Dechuan asked Li Zhifeng.

"His name's Li Zhifeng," You Miao answered.

"I was asking him, not you," You Dechuan said.

Li Zhifeng opened his mouth and stated, "Li Zhifeng."

Nursing his cup of tea, You Miao leaned back against the chair.

You Dechuan continued, "You'll be given back the servants assigned to you in the past, as is proper. I'll have them go to the east wing in a few days."

You Miao didn't respond, so the pair of father and son sat there in silence. Millions of thoughts swarmed You Miao's mind, but he didn't know where to start. A long while after, it was still You Dechuan who broke the silence.

"You've grown much taller," he said. "Much more like an adult now. Have you settled into life in the capital, then?"

Crack! It was the sound of teacup shattering. At last, You Miao went with this method to express his anger, and the tea splashed against the desk.

"Why didn't you tell me? Am I not your son?!"

You Miao's whole body was shaking. It would probably have been best if You Dechuan hadn't brought up the subject of him studying in the capital. The moment the subject was raised, You Miao was immediately reminded of everything the family had lied to him about, and his rage boiled over uncontrollably.

You Dechuan was taken aback at first, but then he exclaimed furiously, "Watch yourself!"

Uncaring of everything, You Miao yelled, "How has my mom ever owed you anything?! You lied to me. You sent me to the capital and kept me in the dark about appointing a new eldest son for three whole years!"

"Your older brother drifted outside for over ten years…" You Dechuan began.

"Then what about me? What about *me*?!" You Miao shouted.

"I didn't intend to appoint another eldest son! You're both the eldest son from a legal wife—"

"You didn't even bother to give me a heads-up, and just conducted this whole shady deal in secret behind my back!" You Miao raged. "Do you think I don't know what you're thinking? It was *planned*, wasn't it, sending me to go study in the capital? You wanted to get rid of me sooner, didn't you?!"

"And what have you gained from your studies in the past three years in the capital?!" You Dechuan demanded. "Aside from messing around—gambling, calling hookers, eating and drinking—what else have you done?! And you have the nerve to come back to ask for more money?!"

Both emitted a dangerous aura, but You Miao was only like an enraged baby tiger; he couldn't hold his own against You Dechuan. You Miao understood his dad all too well, though. He'd done business for nearly twenty years. He started out by using the tea saplings and farmers his legal

wife brought to the marriage to build his enterprise, yet even when he now sat in immense wealth, a merchant was still only a merchant. If the government wanted to do anything to him, You Dechuan would have no way to manage the situation aside from with money.

Have the eldest son inherit the family business, and have the second son become an imperial court official—what meticulously-calculated wishful thinking! You Miao didn't want him to get his way at all.

You Dechuan spoke up. "You've been gone for three years, but all you've done is idle about. Would you still remember your dad if you didn't need to beg me for money? Would you have ever thought to write home?"

You Miao snorted. "I guess in that aspect, *Dad*, we're pretty much the same."

Stumped by this disagreeable son of his, You Dechuan breath was short and angry.

"You and Hange are both legal sons of the You family," You Dechuan said, after regaining his calm. "Your brother will run the family business, while you will be an imperial court official. What's so bad about that?"

Behind You Miao, Li Zhifeng's expression was unreadable.

"Ever since you were young, you've always been the active type," You Dechuan reasoned. "You won't be able to sit still at home, anyway. In the future, if money is needed at court, your brother won't cheat you of a single coin. I wanted to pass on the family business to you at first, but since you don't like running one or keeping the books, there's nothing I can do. Let's drop this subject for now. Let me ask you: at the capital…"

You Miao suddenly did a one-eighty and changed his sour face to a cheeky grin. "I'm home for good. I don't plan on going back to the capital anymore."

You Dechuan had never expected You Miao to change his face so fast; faster than flipping the page of a book. He sneered.

"Not going back? What will you do, then?"

“Nothing,” You Miao said. “I’ll just stay at home. All the money’s spent, so there’s no point in going back to the capital anyway.”

Suppressing his rage, You Dechuan said through gritted teeth, “If you want to study at home, that’s good too. We’ll hire a tutor come spring, and teach your brother to read while we’re at it. It won’t be too late to take the imperial state exam in three years.”

“Nah. I don’t wanna study anymore. It’s boring,” You Miao said.

The pair stared at each other in silence for a moment, then You Dechuan spoke again, the anger in his voice evident.

“Let me test you. What did you learn at school?”

“I didn’t go. I didn’t understand a thing the teacher was saying,” You Miao replied.

You Dechuan was instantly incensed. He nodded repeatedly. “Good. Very good.”

“I only hope to marry a clever and capable girl,” You Miao continued. “Someone who’ll bring some assets into the family to help grow my fortune. I’ll take care of my little family business, take it easy, and spend the rest of my days leisurely running some tea estate…”

Moments later, You Dechuan violently swept all the stationery off the table—the brushes, the ink, the inkstones, the papers.

“*I’ll kill you, you little shit*–! You little prick!”

As if You Dechuan couldn’t tell what You Miao was hinting at; it was so obviously a taunt. Instantly outraged, he picked up a stick and chased You Miao out of the study. You Miao first hid behind Li Zhifeng, who attempted to shield him, but he was pushed away by You Dechuan. Thwarted, You Miao dashed straight out to the garden. You Dechuan was hot on his trail, and the pair caused a ruckus in the process.

“You old prick! My mom helped you build this estate…”

Standing in the middle of the courtyard looking brazen, as if he was afraid of nothing, You Miao opened his mouth and yelled at his dad. As soon as the griping started, You Dechuan knew disaster was imminent. He

didn't spare a moment to call for bodyguards; he immediately turned to look for a wood plank for punishment.

You Miao yelled, "Frickin' burned bridges, watch my mom come haunt you in the middle of the night…"

Steel-faced, You Dechuan shouted as he went chasing after You Miao, "I'm gonna beat you to death, you little punk!"

The commotion alerted both Madam Wang and Ma-yiniang, and they came rushing over to the main building with servants in tow. You Dechuan had knocked his leg against a flowerpot when he exited the study, so he was currently limping as he pursued You Miao with a wood plank in hand, his face flushed the color of a pig's liver.

"Little prick!"

You Miao kept dodging You Dechuan's swings, cursing as he hid behind a flower stand. You Dechuan knocked it away. *Clink, clank, crash.*

"You already had a secret lover when you married my mom, how can you face her?" You Miao continued. "You…"

You Dechuan raised the plank, ready to strike, and You Miao quickly ran to hide behind Li Zhifeng. Just then, someone dashed over to You Dechuan and stopped him in an attempt to mediate. It was You Hange.

"Dad, don't be so mad. Listen to me…"

You Miao stopped yelling. With flowerpots toppled and shattered all over the ground, it was complete mayhem inside the yard.

"Dad, Dad, calm your temper," You Hange continued.

You Hange was blocking You Dechuan and signaling You Miao with his eyes to leave quickly. Madam Wang looked extremely upset.

"Didi, go back to your room first and rest," You Hange added.

You Miao snorted. *What fake benevolence, what fake justice. Who needed you to come mediate this fight?* he thought. You Miao wanted to say something to shut You Hange down, but he couldn't really break the

cordiality for now. The three were stuck in a stalemate when Madam Wang finally walked over.

"All right, all right. What deep grudge can a pair of father and son really have?" she said with a smile. "You Miao only just came back after three years, so don't fight the moment you see each other. Laoye, don't be mad anymore. You Miao, you…"

You Miao didn't wait for her to pay more lip service before he yanked on the lattice shelf in the study's courtyard. The entire rack toppled with a loud rumble. The lucky bamboo, the butterfly palms, the burdocks, the spider plants, the ink bamboo; it all crashed to the ground along with who knows how many precious and valuable ceramic wares.

You Miao turned and left.

You Dechuan inhaled deeply, then let out an angry roar that crashed like thunder.

"You little ingrate! *Stop right there*!"

You Miao exited the yard of the study, and only stopped when You Dechuan was out of sight. Meanwhile, You Dechuan was like a mute who ate goldthread roots—miserable and bitter, but unable to speak. When You Dechuan brought You Hange to the clan gathering that fateful day, the elders had unanimously objected to him legitimizing Wang's status for two reasons: first, Wang didn't formally marry in proper convention, and second, You Hange would become a legal son if she was legitimized.

If You Dechuan had followed the majority opinion and gave You Hange a common son's status instead, then it would have all blown over if You Hange was simply bestowed with some family assets in the future. If You Dechuan had re-married and legitimized the wife *after* Qiao Ke-er, then all things aside, You Miao would've still been the eldest principal son. The problem here was that if Wang was legitimized, then You Hange would become the eldest son, and You Miao would have to defer to him—a complete disregard of convention.

But You Dechuan had always been one who disregarded rules, ever since he was young. He was as stubborn as a mule, just like You Miao. The

moment he locked onto something, there was no talking him out of it.

Yet this was precisely where You Dechuan's wrongs lay. Never mind removing You Miao's status as the eldest principal son, he didn't even discuss the matter with that very son. After all, in his initial opinion, was it not obvious who was older and who was younger? But now that You Miao was home and standing before him, You Dechuan couldn't help but deflate a bit in front of him.

You Dechuan felt guilty, so he could only let this rebelling son curse and attack him as he willed, whether it be openly or sarcastically. Nevertheless, he couldn't truly swallow his rage after all. He shoved You Hange aside and yelled from the yard.

"I sent you to the capital to study, but you managed to waste two thousand silver a year without studying a thing! You never wrote home unless you needed money! Now that you're back, you barely said a word of respect! And you have the face to defy your father and older brother, to fight for the status of the eldest son?! You and your brother were born from the same father—*me*! You are both sons of the You family! Look at how your brother treats you, and yet how do you treat him?!"

You Miao's face was flushed. Feeling both embarrassed and angry, and he clenched his fists as he stood by the wall.

"Dad…don't be angry anymore." With an arm around him, You Hange supported You Dechuan and beckoned him to return to the study. Madam Wang also went over, the handkerchief in her hand aflutter as she walked, and she patted You Dechuan's chest to calm his temper.

You Dechuan was riled up to the extreme, and he pointed at the wall with the plank, yelling, "With the way you act, one day when this old man dies and you're made the head of the family, would your older brother even have a bite to eat?! This little family business will fail in your hands sooner or later! You left home for three years, but you've learned shit, and you dare argue with *me* when you come home empty-handed?! You good-for-nothing piece of trash! Why won't the heavens strike you dead with lightning?!"

"All right, all right…" Madam Wang soothed. "Calm your temper, laoye. Miao-zi is just a little stubborn; you're being too harsh… He's your son,

they're both your sons… Don't take things to heart, laoye…"

You Miao turned around and headed back to his quarters, wiping his tears with his sleeves. As he walked, he finally broke into sobs, absentmindedly entering the east wing. You Dechuan was still cursing up a fierce storm in the study's courtyard, but You Miao couldn't hear the specifics anymore. He pushed the door to enter his room, then fell head-first onto his bed before he started bawling.

The skies had already dimmed then. While Li Zhifeng and Muqi-er sat facing each other outside, You Miao slept for another while until it was time to light the lamps. Muqi-er came into the room to the set the table, but You Miao was slumped on the bed, not feeling hungry.

"Take it away," You Miao said.

And so, Muqi-er and Li Zhifeng ate the food themselves.

Later that night, You Hange came to knock on the door. "You Miao, gege has something to say."

"The young master is asleep," Li Zhifeng's voice answered from the outer chamber.

You Miao didn't respond, hoping You Hange would just get the hell out.

You Hange left, and You Miao slept the entire night through without rousing until daybreak. When he got up the next day, his legs were weak like he'd been sapped of energy. When he ate his congee, all he tasted was bitterness in his mouth. Even his throat felt a little tight.

Muqi-er spoke up in a small voice. "Shaoye, pardon this lowly one speaking out of turn…"

"Just out with it," You Miao said.

"They've already moved in. No matter what shaoye does, there's no way to kickout that wicked wench and country bumpkin…" Muqi-er said. "Something, something, pain and joy…"

"'Don't cause pain to your loved ones and joy to your enemies,'" You Miao finished for him as he stirred out the few strings of ginger in the congee with his chopsticks and picked them out.

“Yes, that’s it, that’s what it was…” Muqi-er replied nervously, standing with his hands dropped at his sides.

You Miao listened expressionlessly. He knew Muqi-er couldn’t stand to stay anymore, either; he was You Miao’s man, left right and center, so he hoped You Miao would take him along to the capital just like Shiqi-er. At the very least, it’d give him a future to anticipate.

But You Miao had already made up his mind not to return to the capital. You Dechuan told him to go, and You Miao was reluctant to heed his wish. What was so good about You Hange that he got the right to claim the family assets? He had accomplished nothing whatsoever, yet since he and You Miao were both legal sons, Sunshower Tea Estate would have to be divided evenly. You Miao had no designs on his father’s wealth, but now here was a guy he had never even met before coming to steal what was his, like a turtledove occupying a magpie’s nest. You Miao couldn’t swallow this indignation.

He refused to become a government official, either. In fact, he would refuse to do anything his dad wanted him to do. The old fart thought everything would go his way? Yeah, right!

You Miao chucked the chopsticks and decided he would simply live at home like this. He’d be as obnoxious as possible and repulse Madam Wang and You Hange completely.

After breakfast, You Miao still felt limp and feeble without any energy. His head was buzzing noisily, and it felt as if he was walking on cotton, so he went back to bed. He wasn’t sure how long he’d slept, but in his haze, he sensed icy fingers touching his forehead. When he opened his eyes, he saw Muqi-er starting up the brazier.

“The hills and mountains are damp because of the fog, and it’s always raining in the winter,” Muqi said.

“He’s feverish,” was Li Zhifeng’s reply.

Startled, Muqi went to check on You Miao, who tiredly sat up.

“It’s nothing, just not acclimatized yet,” You Miao said. “I haven’t come home in three years. It’ll be fine after a few days’ rest.”

You Miao was dressed in outer robes when he went to bed earlier, so Li Zhifeng held him up and helped him undress before tucking him back in to sleep soundly and pulling the brazier closer. You Miao had a slight chill and had been curled up in the blankets shivering, but now he was finally warmed.

When Li Zhifeng exited the outer chamber, he said, “Get a doctor.”

“We’ll have to report this to the master,” Muqi-er said. “You stay here and watch over him. I’ll go.”

Li Zhifeng waved and pointed to the ground, gesturing for Muqi-er to stay. He then changed his clothes and crossed through the corridors himself, heading for the main hall.

You Dechuan had been severely angered the night before, and only begrudgingly went to bed after taking two large bowls of medicine to calm his inflamed liver.[35] He was up before the day even broke, however, and sat in the hall, lost in thought. You Hange had also risen early and came to greet his father first thing in the morning, but You Dechuan had only nodded without a word, holding the teacup in a daze.

And so, You Hange also stayed seated in the main hall in silence.

When Madam Wang emerged after washing up, everyone was silent—it was as if the entire room was filled with wooden people who couldn’t speak. After the servants had set breakfast on the table, You Hange finally spoke up.

“Lin-shu, can you go see if my little brother is up?”

The butler had his hands tucked in his sleeves, and his eyes were half-squinted. “I just came from the east wing. The second young master is still sleeping.”

You Dechuan snorted. “Just eat. Don’t pay any attention to that punk.”

You Dechuan started to dig in. When You Hange picked up his bowl, however, he shot his mom a look.

Madam Wang spoke up. “You’ll have to assign a few more people to attend Miao-zi. Muqi-er alone probably can’t handle everything.”

You Dechuan sighed and put down his bowl heavily before he started to scold. “That brat is too stubborn. Even if you do all this for him, it’d be pointless; he won’t be grateful. Don’t go provoking him unnecessarily. He’s got wood for brains and talking won’t get through to him. Hange, I heard you went over there last night. You didn’t get cussed out?”

You Hange gave a quick smile in response, but didn’t answer.

Madam Wang chimed in, “You’re the older brother. You ought to look after your little brother…”

“No need to mind him in the future,” You Dechuan cut in. “Let him go live or die on his own.”

“Laoye, what are you saying?” Madam Wang chided, sending You Hange looks as she did so.

You Hange grinned as he ate his congee. “Dad favors didi, I know.”

You Dechuan glared, his beard bristling, but Madam Wang started to chuckle just as he was about to say something. You Hange soon followed suit, unable to resist. With how harmoniously the family of three was getting along, now You Dechuan couldn’t really say much more.

“There are only two people attending Miao-zi,” Madam Wang said. “One of whom has a background that remains a mystery. He has no manners to speak of; he can be left to clean and spruce up the yard and run some errands, but he’s less than adequate to tend to Miao-zi’s daily living.”

Only then did You Dechuan recall the servant who stood behind You Miao. “What’s that guy’s name again? I didn’t hear him say.”

“Apparently he’s a slave that was given to him by a friend,” Madam Wang replied. “He committed crimes in the past and killed people. Sounds kind of scary…”

You Dechuan’s face immediately fell.

This was also news to You Hange, and he wondered with a frown, “He’s killed before? Doesn’t that mean he has to repay his crimes with his own life?”

“How is that acceptable?!” You Dechuan exclaimed. “Go ask for the details. If he’s an outlaw, then keeping him at home is too…”

Just as he was talking, a boy servant outside poked his head in and started to look around.

“What is it?” the butler standing to the side immediately demanded.

“Li Zhifeng…requested to see the master,” the boy servant said.

“Li…what Feng, who?” You Dechuan asked.

“It’s the man who was with the second young master yesterday,” answered the boy servant. “He said he has something to tell laoye.”

Well, speak of the devil. Madam Wang’s expression changed slightly, and the butler rebuked, “Do you not see what time it is? A newcomer doesn’t know the rules, but do you not know them, either?”

The boy servant hurriedly replied, “He said it’s important, that it can’t wait.”

This was the first time You Dechuan had met such an unruly servant, but just as well. He would interrogate him, and if the man turned out to be a most fiendish brute, then he would grant him some coins and send him on his way.

“Send him in,” You Dechuan instructed.

Madam Wang placed her chopsticks down and looked outside. Dressed in a long, deep-blue robe, Li Zhifeng stood by the threshold neither entering nor bowing. The mere sight of him irritated You Dechuan. However, his features were prominent, his eyes were profound, and there was a knife scar streaking down from his brow bone. You Dechuan didn’t dare throw a fit, lest this man was some outlaw picked up from somewhere. You Dechuan made up his mind—after a few days, he would find some excuse and kick the man out. People like him would need money before being dismissed, and he couldn’t be given a round of tongue-lashing before he was driven off, either. If there was resentment, he would use any opportunity to return for revenge.

Suppressing his temper, You Dechuan demanded, “What is it?”

Li Zhifeng spoke up with a grim voice from beyond the threshold. “Your son has fallen ill. Give me some money and I’ll go find him a doctor.”

You Dechuan snorted and said angrily, “Leave him! Perfect if he dies!”

Li Zhifeng eyed the three in the main hall and said nothing. His staring was making Madam Wang unnerved and incredibly uncomfortable, so she quickly said, “Laoye, you don’t mean that…”

The butler sounded the dismissal. “Get out, get out. This isn’t a place you can hang around, what a lack of manners.”

Even as Li Zhifeng merely stood outside, those inside the hall could feel the pressure. It felt wrong no matter if they sat or stood.

The butler shouted, “Somebody! Beat him away!”

“Hold on, hold on,” You Hange spoke up, stopping the butler. He then turned to the door and asked, “You’re called Li Zhifeng?”

Li Zhifeng turned and left without answering the question. This made You Dechuan fly into a rage. Even this servant disregarded him?! Where would it end?!

“I’ll go call a doctor for didi,” You Hange said, putting down his chopsticks.

“Just eat your breakfast,” Madam Wang said. “I can get a servant to do that.”

“I think it might be best if I went. It’ll be a good chance to make a trip down the mountain, anyway. Dad, Mom, enjoy your meal.”

You Hange rose to his feet and left without finishing his meal. You Dechuan didn’t stop him, and only shook his head and let out a long sigh. Naturally, Madam Wang knew what he was sighing about.

“He *should* be the one to go,” she said with a smile.

“They’re both my sons, yet how are they so different?” You Dechuan lamented.

“What do you mean?” Madam Wang teased. “You Miao’s like you were when you were young; impulsive and reckless. The other one is like you

after you established yourself."

You Dechuan recalled the time when he was sixteen and chuckled—a time when he so loftily and lavishly spent in the springtime of Yang Prefecture.

"Heh. That kid didn't learn anything good, but he's certainly mastered spending money like water."

"Had it not been for the Qiao family, you might've ended up like Miao-zi and gotten beaten and booted from home," Madam Wang added casually. "You certainly didn't come up short when it came to romantic encounters, either."

Back then, You Dechuan had been a brilliant scholar known throughout the Jiangnan and Jiangbei regions, and wrote beautifully. An expert in poetry and prose, his overflowing talents had bewitched many fine ladies. Yet it was also his unbridled character that caused him to fail the state exams time and time again, and never won him any favors from the examiners. In the end, he spent all his savings and was plunged into poverty.

In the Thirty-Third Year of Ying Tian, Wang pawned off her family fortune in order to send You Dechuan to the capital for the state exams. Alas, the heavens do not heed mortal wishes, and You Dechuan failed his tests miserably. Penniless by the time he returned to the You Clan in Cang Prefecture, the elders forced him to marry Qiao Ke-er. Wang was already pregnant at the time, but she refused to be a concubine and would rather raise You Hange by herself.

When he looked back on it now, You Dechuan deeply felt he owed a great deal to Madam Wang. With the family now thriving, he sent his second son You Miao to the capital to study in the hopes of buying him a government title, but that little son wasn't so easily handled and only knew how to torment him.

Reminded of the past, You Dechuan incessantly shook his head as he sighed with mixed emotions. "I owe you and Hange. Now that I'm old, I can't take much more hassle. I just want to pass my days quietly and watch over you guys."

Madam Wang laughed. “It certainly is time to help those brothers find a wife to look after them. I think…”

“Oh, gosh, no,” You Dechuan declined before she could finish. “There’s an order when it comes to older and younger. We haven’t found a match for Hange yet, so there’s no reason for You Miao to marry first…”

Madam Wang’s expression changed slightly, but You Dechuan continued, “I’ll take proper care of that business. One step at a time. I think that brat will be vexing us for some time, I’m just worried you won’t be able to handle it.”

Madam Wang had originally planned on matchmaking for You Miao, so that once he married she could bring up the subject of establishing his own household. Half of the people at Sunshower Tea Estate were on her side, so she had a good grasp of all that You Miao complained about the night before. She figured that You Miao wouldn’t be able to stay for long in this house, so if he married early, he could be sent away. That way, they could all avoid the vexation wrought by the constant sight of each other.

“The man following him,” Madam Wang said, changing the subject. “How does laoye want to handle him? He looks aggressive and completely disregards the rules. I think he looked quite frightening, so he probably shouldn’t stay inside this house for long.”

“When that boy’s feeling better, I’ll give him some money and have him dismiss the man himself,” You Dechuan said.

CHAPTER 8

Unaware of You Dechuan's intentions, Li Zhifeng returned to the east wing as soon as he left the main hall. He asked Muqi from outside the door, "Got money?"

"What for?" Muqi responded.

Li Zhifeng rubbed his fingers together, gesturing for him to just hand the cash over.

Startled, Muqi let slip, "The master wouldn't…?"

Li Zhifeng immediately motioned for him to be quiet. Muqi's expression flickered between shades of dark while he dug in his clothes for broken silvers.

Keeping his voice to a whisper so that You Miao wouldn't hear from inside the room, Muqi asked, "We're gonna go find a doctor ourselves?"

Li Zhifeng jabbed a finger at himself to indicate that he would go alone.

"Do you know the way?" Muqi asked. "Make sure you get the best doctor in town. It's five maces of silver for a house call, and then there's still the prescription after that. I have two taels here…"

Li Zhifeng took the broken silvers. He took a step forward, then hesitated as if wondering whether to go inside and see You Miao. In the end, he decided against it and left.

Inside, You Miao was awake and heard everything. He lay stiffly in bed, angry and bitter, and after Li Zhifeng was gone, he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Oh, just let me die!"

Pulling the blanket over his head, he turned toward the wall, swallowing his tears nonstop.

You Hange arrived right after Li Zhifeng left. The bedroom door opened with a creak, but You Miao ignored it, remaining prone on the bed. You Hange's steps were slow and light as he approached. When he pulled back the blanket You Miao was huddled under, there was a big wet spot on the pillow.

"My mom left me, my dad doesn't want me anymore, either…" You Miao sobbed. "Leave me alone and let me die."

You Hange's hands on his forehead were icy-cold. You Miao's entire face was flushed from the fever, and his head felt like it was about to split open; thinking You Hange was Li Zhifeng, You Miao lay there unmoving with his eyes closed, convinced he was about to die.

You Hange turned and left the room, closing the door behind him before he hurriedly hailed for a carriage to go down the mountain for a doctor.

Meanwhile, Li Zhifeng had all but run down the mountain. Sunshower Tea Estate was a good forty miles from Pei County. It was nearly the Winter Solstice, the last harvest of winter teas had just finished, and the tea farmers were resting along the sides of the road.

Li Zhifeng stopped at the same eatery that they had passed previously on the way to the estate. He asked the boss lady, "Who's the best doctor in Pei County?"

The boss lady pointed the way. "Follow the Ancient Tea Horse Road east until you get to the county city, then head to east of the market and look for a Baoji Hall. Doctor Xing there is as good as they come, though he does have an eccentric temper. Why, is your young master sick? Wait, hang on, have some water before you go…"

East side of the city, Baoji Hall… Li Zhifeng turned and continued his run toward the city. He left Sunshower Tea Estate around late morning and arrived at the city shortly after noon. He made straight for the apothecary without even stopping for a drink of water. Winter was the season of colds and coughs; there were quite a few people inside the hall waiting to see the doctor or pick up their prescriptions.

Entering the courtyard, Li Zhifeng immediately asked, “Which one is Doctor Xing?”

Someone pointed him toward the old man sitting inside the hall seeing patients. Li Zhifeng strode over and set the five maces of silver down on the table.

“Doctor, please come see my young master.”

The sight of Li Zhifeng enraged the old man instantly. “Who do you think you are?!” he berated. “Under my roof, even Yanluo, the King of Hell himself, better get in line if he wants to nab anyone! Get the hell out! What lack of manners!”

The onlooking patients started to laugh, but Li Zhifeng only persisted. “It’s at Sunshower Tea Estate. It’s a bit far.”

Doctor Xing snatched his cane and beat on Li Zhifeng heedlessly while he angrily rebuked, “Nope! Not going!”

The cane struck Li Zhifeng several times, but he only swept his robes out of the way and dropped onto one knee on the ground. He soon bent the other leg as well, and he knelt there ramrod straight before abruptly bowing and knocking his forehead on the floor with a dull *thud*.

Doctor Xing was astonished—it wasn’t like he had never been prostrated to, but he had certainly never heard such a sound before.

In a tone of utmost humility, Li Zhifeng quietly said, “Doctor, my young master You Miao has come down with a bad cold. His mother died when he was young; his father has appointed another as the eldest son and willfully neglects his sickness. I beg you, sir, to come with me to see him, just once. I’m clumsy with words, but your benevolence would—”

“You Miao?” Doctor Xing narrowed his eyes.

The patients were crowded around, some tiptoeing to get a better look. They couldn’t hear what Li Zhifeng was saying, only that he was muttering something before he hit his head on the ground again with another thud. Everyone heard *that*.

The crowd piped up, talking all at once, and tried to help Li Zhifeng persuade the doctor.

"Just go already, old man Xing!"

"What if it's urgent?"

"Yeah, a life's at stake here. Look how hard he's kowtowing; better not delay."

Li Zhifeng bowed again. At the third *thud*, Doctor Xing finally couldn't take it anymore and relented.

"All right, all right, get up. I'll go take a look. Just this once."

Doctor Xing went to the back hall for his medicine case and instructed his apprentice to watch the front before he followed Li Zhifeng out.

"Where's the carriage?" he demanded upon exiting the apothecary. "No carriage and no horse, do you expect this old man to walk forty miles with you?!"

"I'll carry you," Li Zhifeng answered.

Doctor Xing was shocked speechless for a good while, and only realized Li Zhifeng was being serious when he dropped to one knee on the ground.

Incredulous, Doctor Xing fumed, "Young man, you…" When Li Zhifeng didn't move, he sighed. "Forget it. You can carry me when we get to the mountain. Let's go, let's go."

Li Zhifeng stayed kneeling, however, with his back to the doctor. Doctor Xing chuckled at the sight in spite of himself. "Where'd this child come from? So stubborn."

The onlooking crowd found Li Zhifeng's actions to be conspicuous and hilarious, but it was this obstinance that won over old man Xing, who laughed heartily at the display.

"Very well. Let's go."

With that, Doctor Xing at last allowed Li Zhifeng to carry him on his back. Li Zhifeng finally rose to his feet and started the run back to Sunshower Tea Estate.

You Hange's horse-drawn carriage went along the Ancient Tea Horse Road after leaving the estate. In that time, Li Zhifeng had jogged the whole forty miles back and all the way up the mountain in one breath. He didn't greet anyone upon his return to the estate as he made a beeline for the east wing. It was nearly dusk when Doctor Xing entered You Miao's room, spilling the golden rays of the setting sun across the floor when he pushed in the door.

After being carried for so long, Doctor Xing's arms were sore and numb. He turned to Li Zhifeng and asked, "Young master this, young master that; who exactly are you, anyway?"

"I'm a servant," Li Zhifeng replied. "Please see to him first without delay."

You Miao was fast asleep when the doctor arrived. Blearily, he felt someone touching his hand. He turned to wave whoever it was away, but was held down by Li Zhifeng.

"Wh…what're you doing?!" You Miao protested in a raspy voice, but when he turned his head, he was greeted by the sight of Li Zhifeng's handsome profile illuminated by the dim light of dusk.

"The doctor is here," Li Zhifeng said. "Sorry it took so long."

"Be good and stay still," chided Doctor Xing. "I remember you now. You're the young master of the You family, nickname Shuilin-er,[36] am I right?"

You Miao barely recognized Doctor Xing, and he ventured, unsure, "And you're Doctor… Doctor Xing?"

Doctor Xing smiled as he stroked his beard. He had treated You Miao once before, many years ago. You Miao had grown up and his appearance had changed, but Doctor Xing himself still looked more or less the same as before.

Nodding in response, Doctor Xing chided, "You have to see a doctor when you're sick, and take your medication to get better. Your friend ran eighty miles—down the mountain and back—and even carried this grandpa here for you. Make sure you take care of yourself instead of despairing."

Then he turned to Li Zhifeng and said, “Here, have him sit up. He caught a cold, so it’ll be fine once the chill is dispersed.”

Doctor Xing sterilized a silver needle over a flame and inserted it into the acupuncture point between the thumb and forefinger of You Miao’s hand. You Miao immediately yelped, feeling as if it was pulling on a tendon running from his arm to the depths of his head. Li Zhifeng hugged him tightly.

“Hold him still, don’t let him move around,” Doctor Xing said with a chuckle.

Li Zhifeng answered with a grunt and bent to press a kiss to You Miao’s forehead, then lifted a hand to pat his head. All wrapped up in his blanket, You Miao nestled into Li Zhifeng’s arms like a helpless child. He swallowed—there was bitterness in his mouth again.

One round of acupuncture later, You Miao had sweated out the fever, but the color of his face still wasn’t great as he leaned weakly against Li Zhifeng.

“Medicine is a must if you want to recover quickly,” Doctor Xing said. “Which of you will come with me to fetch the prescription?”

Li Zhifeng buried his face against You Miao’s ear and whispered, “I’ll send the doctor back and pick up your prescription.”

“M’kay.” You Miao’s head still hurt, but the haze had cleared up quite a bit, and the stuffiness in his chest that made him nauseous had dulled to throbbing twinges.

“Shaoye, go back to sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning,” Muqi-er said.

Rising to his feet, Doctor Xing instructed, “Make some easy-to-digest congee for him. I’m leaving now.”

Li Zhifeng nodded.

“I’ll…be sure to go thank you, doctor, some other day,” You Miao said.

Doctor Xing patted him on the shoulder and motioned for him to lie down, shaking his head without saying a word, then walked out of the

room.

It was evening when Li Zhifeng carried Doctor Xing down the mountain. The road was pitch-black, but Li Zhifeng's eyes were as bright as an eagle's.

"Are you a servant from Lady Qiao's house?" asked the doctor from Li Zhifeng's back.

Li Zhifeng answered as he trekked through the darkness at an even speed, "No, I was purchased by the young master."

"It's rare to see such a loyal servant," Doctor Xing commented. "Where are you from?"

"Beyond the Wall," Li Zhifeng replied.

The doctor sighed. Old man Xing had heard talk every now and then about the affairs of these past few years—after all, the You were the local wealthy merchant family, and even a mere rustle in the wind would make gossip fly around the markets in no time. He had seen Qiao Ke-er for illnesses a few times in the past, thus he considered her a past acquaintance.

"Lady Qiao had such a good-natured temperament, but it seems You Dechuan still couldn't forget the past after all," Doctor Xing remarked.

Li Zhifeng made a noise of acknowledgment. The dotted smattering of household light from the city in the distance was coming into sight.

Once back at the apothecary, Doctor Xing said, "Go rest for a bit while I write up the prescription."

"Shifu is back!" exclaimed a young apprentice from inside Baoji Hall.

"Doctor Xing!" You Hange strode out in welcome, only to pause when he saw Li Zhifeng. Old man Xing didn't even spare You Hange a glance as he walked past him to wash his hands.

With no clue why Li Zhifeng was there, You Hange started to ask, "You…"

But Li Zhifeng acted as though he didn't see You Hange as he stood outside the door, so You Hange turned back to the doctor. "Doctor Xing, I

am from Sunshower Tea Estate. My father You Dechuan sent me to invite the doctor for a visit to the estate to see my little brother."

Doctor Xing snorted. "Did that philandering father of yours finally remember that he still has a gravely ill son at home?"

You Hange's face fell slightly. Doctor Xing scribbled the prescription and passed it to an apprentice to prepare. The apprentice returned shortly with the packets.

"That's five maces of silver. Which shaoye will be paying?" the apprentice asked, looking at Li Zhifeng and You Hange.

Li Zhifeng reached into his robes for the money. You Hange put two and two together rushed to say, "I'll pay."

You Hange moved to pull Li Zhifeng's sleeve, but Li Zhifeng flicked his hand and the piece of broken silver flew and landed in the payment bowl with a *clang*, twirling inside as the echo of the metal lingered. Then, Li Zhifeng once again dropped to his knees and bowed three times in respect toward Doctor Xing. This time, Doctor Xing accepted the gesture with a noise of approval.

"Go get something to eat before you head back to the estate," Doctor Xing said. "Running back and forth like that is too much strain for even the sturdiest people."

Li Zhifeng didn't respond; he turned and left without a word and headed back toward the estate at a run.

You Hange had waited for Doctor Xing until late into the evening, only to find out that the doctor had already seen You Miao. It was almost the apothecary's closing time, and the patients were discussing the You family's affairs again—the talk boiled down to You Dechuan favoring his older son and leaving the younger to die. You Hange wasn't in the mood to bother with these ignorant people, so he went back outside to hail the carriage, instructing it to chase after Li Zhifeng.

After exiting of the apothecary, Li Zhifeng didn't immediately leave the city. Instead, he stopped by a general store to make a small purchase. You Hange stopped his horse-drawn carriage at the stone road outside the store.

“Li Zhifeng, what else do you need to buy?” You Hange asked. “I can get it if you don’t have enough money.”

Li Zhifeng didn’t respond as he tucked away the small package and turned to leave the city.

The bright moon hung above the vast horizon and shone upon the Ancient Tea Horse Road. The undulating mountain peaks in the distance looked like the silhouette of a slumbering dragon. Bathed in the moonlight, Li Zhifeng’s pace on foot was almost a match for the horse-drawn carriage.

“Get on!” You Hange shouted from the carriage.

Li Zhifeng ignored him and kept going.

You Hange tried again, “I’ll give you a lift!”

Li Zhifeng drew in a deep breath and, letting out a howl that echoed through the hills and trees, he started running even faster. You Hange was greatly startled, but by the time he snapped out of it, Li Zhifeng had already vanished into the distance like a whirlwind.

It was already past midnight by the time Li Zhifeng got back; it had been more than sixteen hours since his first trip down the mountain.

“You’re really something,” Muqi-er said. “Two round trips to town; that’s a hundred-and-sixty miles. Did you run the entire way?”

Li Zhifeng only gestured him to be quiet, so as to not wake You Miao. He handed Muqi the packet of medicine and asked, “Has the young master eaten yet?”

“He had some plain congee and went to bed,” Muqi replied.

When he heard this, Li Zhifeng sighed and finally began to catch his breath. Without even taking off his clothes, he fell asleep in the outer chamber then and there.

Early the next morning, You Miao felt something cool around his neck in his sleep. Groggily, he raised a hand to grope for it, only to feel Li Zhifeng’s long fingers. When he cracked his eyes open, he saw Li Zhifeng tying a red string around his neck. It hung a jade pendant—the same one he gave Li Zhifeng previously.

“I’m not gonna die,” You Miao mumbled weakly. “This cold is nothing serious.”

Li Zhifeng tucked him in snugly before he went outside the chamber to decoct medicine. As it simmered, the herbal scent filled the whole room. You Miao made a face at the smell of it when Li Zhifeng came over carrying the bowl of medicine.

“Drink your medicine,” Li Zhifeng said.

Resigned, You Miao put his face to the bowl Li Zhifeng was holding and took in the decoction. Li Zhifeng gave him a piece of candy afterward, at which You Miao grinned.

Back when they were at the capital and Li Zhifeng was recovering from the internal injuries he’d sustained from the beatings, You Miao would always give him a piece of candy after forcing him to drink his medicine. He used to say, “*The candy will make the bitterness go away, but you have to take your meds to get better.*” He didn’t think Li Zhifeng had remembered all this time.

You Miao stayed in bed even after he took his medicine, lying there quietly as he rested.

“Open the door a little, Muqi-er,” You Miao said.

Both the inner and outer chamber doors were opened wide, and without needing to be told, Li Zhifeng moved the screen to the side of the room.

You Miao gazed outside at the blue sky above the courtyard’s enclosure walls, his mind much more at peace than before. It was still that same business on his mind, but after getting sick, he had no more energy to make a fuss. His father hadn’t come to see him, uncaring whether if he lived or died; he could tell that his position in the family wasn’t what it used to be.

If he returned to the capital now, he would just get sent away with a hundred silver at most, and he’d be playing right into Madam Wang and You Dechuan’s hands. And once he entered the court, he would have to look after the whole family. You Miao was *not* doing that.

But where else could he go, if not the capital? It wasn't like living here at home was an actual option in the long term—at first, he thought he'd stay here until he drove Madam Wang out, but even he knew that was just a child's angry, wishful thinking. How could he, since his father had married her? He'd only be making himself miserable by staying here.

"Being dependent on your dad, on your mom, on the ancestors," You Miao muttered to himself, "isn't what being a man is about."

At that moment, You Miao was struck with the impulsive urge to pack a small bag and go roam the world with Li Zhifeng. If his father could start his business from scratch, then why couldn't he? Start with a few silver, buy and sell at a profit; if You Dechuan could do it, then why wouldn't he be able to?

You Miao had seen for himself the kind of profit that could be reaped at the border. With Li Zhifeng to protect him, it shouldn't be difficult to make a trip to the border come spring when the flowers were in bloom. In order to do that, however, he would first need enough money for his startup capital. And to get money, he'd have to ask his old man.

You Miao couldn't stop the plans forming in his head. How should he buy and sell once he got his hands on the funds, and where to get the sales permits…? Small-time peddlers didn't need papers, but it would be easy to get caught that way, and the authorities could use any random excuse to confiscate his goods. A northern expedition was a long journey with many checkpoints along the way, so it was best to play it safe and have the required documents.

Should he go back to the capital and ask Li Yan to use his connections to get him permits? That could work. Maybe he could even talk some of the bros into joining in, with everyone contributing some money. The cogs in You Miao's head turned rapidly; rather than tangling himself further with the mess at home and thinking about how to get back at Madam Wang and her son in the future, he turned that misery into strength instead, and his previous dejection disappeared into thin air.

By evening, You Miao was already plotting on how to swindle the most money he could from his old man. Grin and tell him he had turned over a

new leaf and would go to school at the capital properly, and accept the family's plans for him? That wouldn't work; the old man definitely wouldn't believe him. Throw a fit and demand that he gave him his mom's dowry? Request a split of the family assets? That probably wouldn't work, either, especially with Madam Wang glowering from the side with greedy eyes… He wouldn't get much money from the split at all. But all he needed was a couple hundred silver in bills to start. Once he turned a profit, he wouldn't need to worry about money in the future.

What if he stole some of the old man's stuff and pawned it off? That was a good idea; You Miao was moved by it. He could just grab some random valuable antiques and paintings. The problem was the people at Pei County would recognize the stuff as valuables from Sunshower Tea Estate and refuse to take it. He would have to haul them to Yang Prefecture or the imperial capital to sell. Oh yeah… If he was going to the capital anyway, this would be a good chance to pick up some valuable goods to trade. Once at the capital, You Miao would be far out of reach, and his old man would have no power over him.

You Miao ended up spending the whole day in bed, but he had thought things through and the suffocating anger he had pent up in his chest this whole time dispersed completely. He was still unresigned, of course. But right now, all of that had transformed into derision toward his old man. Ever since he was young, he had heard his mom's side of the family talk, and he could vaguely sense that You Dechuan didn't like his mother. He never used to think much of it before, though, since he used to be the only son of the family…

You Miao could hear the medicine pot crackling over the fire outside the chamber, and all of a sudden, hunger seized him.

"Is there anything to eat?" he asked, rubbing his tummy.

"Yes." Extraordinarily, Li Zhifeng answered without prompting. He then glanced at You Miao and said, "Drink your medicine first."

You Miao took the bowl and flashed a smile. "I'll do this myself."

Li Zhifeng stared at You Miao, and You Miao answered what he knew he wanted to ask. "I've thought things through and got over it. I won't

deliberately make myself upset.”

Li Zhifeng didn’t respond and only fed You Miao a candy as he took the empty bowl away.

Muqi-er came running in just then, smiling. “Shaoye, there’s someone calling from the capital. He says he’s your friend!”

You Miao furrowed his brows and got up. When his feet touched the ground, however, a wave of dizziness washed over him. Muqi-er quickly went to assist him and they walked out.

“It’s an officer. He’s come all this way and hasn’t even drunk a drop of water,” Muqi-er said.

“Where is he?” You Miao asked.

“In the main hall,” Muqi-er replied.

You Miao was wrapped in outer robes, his face still a little pale, and he entered the hall without waiting for the announcement of his arrival. You Dechuan was sitting in the head seat; on his left sat a civil official, and next to him sat a military officer in leather armor.

You Miao recognized the civil official as the Deputy County Magistrate, but the military officer was only somewhat familiar. You Miao vaguely recalled having met him before, he just couldn’t remember who it was.

You Dechuan ordered with a voice full of authority, “You Miao, come greet Lord Huang and Lord Nie.”

“You Miao?” The Deputy County Magistrate chuckled.

You Miao cupped his fist before the official, but he couldn’t stop stealing glances at the officer. And then, he finally remembered.

“You’re that man from just outside the capital…” You Miao said.

The officer was indeed the one who, just as You Miao had left the imperial capital, stopped and detained You Miao’s horse-drawn carriage to be searched—Captain Nie Dan.

Nie Dan replied with a curt nod, “That’s right. That was this mere humble one.”

“You Miao, where are your manners?” lectured You Dechuan.

You Miao hung out with a bunch of wastrel elites at the capital, so when had he ever cared for sixth-rank officers? But despite You Dechuan’s immense wealth, he held no office, so he had to bend his waist to whichever government official came his way. This was also one of the reasons why You Dechuan wanted to send his son to the capital at all cost.

Looking as if he’d heard gossip of some sort, Deputy County Magistrate Huang chuckled knowingly. “It’s been a few years; you’ve grown taller.”

You Miao flashed a smile and shot You Dechuan a look before he went to seat himself in the second chair on the right. Nie Dan’s eyes were as sharp as an eagle’s, and he gave You Miao an appraising look. At that moment, no one in the hall spoke. You Dechuan then turned to Deputy County Magistrate Huang.

“My worthless son went to the capital for a few years, and now he’s forgotten all his manners.”

Deputy County Magistrate Huang chuckled. “It’s fine, it’s fine. Young men are naturally rebellious. Though I did hear talk a while ago that the Third Prince has taken a liking to You Miao, and wants to summon him to the palace as a study companion…”

“Gosh,” You Dechuan sighed emphatically while shaking his head. “He’s still young, still young. We’ll see in a few years.”

You Miao suddenly spoke up and asked Nie Dan, “Did Li Yan send you?”

Nie Dan was silent for a long time before he replied, “When will you visit the capital again?”

Ignoring his question and being so rude about it too; You Miao was annoyed. If they were in the imperial capital, You Miao would’ve cussed him out! Nonetheless, since he had a government title, Nie Dan was one rank above them.

“Why aren’t you answering Lord Nie’s question?” You Dechuan scolded.

“I…I’ll see in the new year,” You Miao responded. “Why have you come all the way here?”

Nie Dan nodded. You Dechuan was about to yell again, but Nie Dan raised his hand to stop him and turned to You Miao.

“Your friend requested the recovery of the chests you lost beyond the border, and they have been found. Take a look and see if anything else is missing. There is also a letter.”

Nie Dan got up and handed You Miao a letter. You Dechuan and Deputy County Magistrate Huang both got up too; You Miao was the only one who still sat there lazily as he took the envelope. He thought the letter was from Li Yan at first, but he didn’t recognize the writing at all.

The envelope was addressed as follows: “To my dear brother, You Miao.”

You Dechuan stood to send the guests off, so You Miao rose to his feet at last and trailed behind his dad to see Nie Dan and Deputy County Magistrate Huang to the second entrance.

Deputy County Magistrate Huang started, “I think, Lord Nie, why don’t you—”

“I’ll ride my horse back.” Nie Dan cupped his fist and saluted You Miao.

Nie Dan’s position was higher in rank than Deputy County Magistrate Huang’s, and so it was the latter who had to salute to him. Nie Dan’s horse was tethered just outside, and the man mounted it and descended the mountain. Only then did Deputy County Magistrate Huang bid You Dechuan farewell, the two exchanging a bout of pleasantries before he mounted his sedan and left as well.

You Dechuan’s face darkened as soon as the two officials left. You Miao didn’t give him a chance to speak, however, turning around and going back into the hall.

“Here,” You Miao said, pointing at the two chests he stood beside. “This is what I brought back for you to show my respects.”

You Dechuan’s face changed, at a loss for words.

You Miao continued, sounding derisive, “However, I was unlucky and got mugged by Barbarians on the way; almost got killed, even. But I’m unloved by both Dad and Mom, and even the heavens and the earth ignored my pleas for help…”

You Dechuan was about to say something, but the latter half of what You Miao said vexed him so much that he was rendered speechless. You Miao wasn’t afraid of him, though, and he continued to speak.

“...If it wasn’t for a stranger named Zhao Chao taking a beating for me __”

“*What*?!” You Dechuan exclaimed, as if he had just heard some sort of a joke. “*Who* took a beating for you?”

You Miao answered harshly, “A complete stranger named Zhao Chao! Who I happened to meet while *locked up*! A complete stranger took a beating for me, meanwhile, I’ve been back for so fucking long already but my own *dad* hasn’t even bothered to ask how my journey went!”

“Y-y-you…” You Dechuan convulsed with anger. He raised his cane, wanting to hit You Miao but unable to bring himself to do so.

The pair of father and son locked eyes for a long time, neither speaking a word.

At last, You Miao sneered. “You said I came home empty-handed. Well, the stuff I brought to show my respect is all here, so go ahead and go through it at your leisure.” Then he left with a whirl of his sleeves.

You Dechuan exhaled a long sigh, standing there in the main hall.

Madam Wang entered the hall then and asked, “What was the Deputy County Magistrate here for? And that military officer?”

You Dechuan sat down and rubbed his temple. Madam Wang went over and sat as well, smiling as she said, “Why didn’t you call Hange to come to meet them and chat? And these two chests…”

The chests were beat up as if they had gone through a rough journey.

“You Miao’s friend from the capital had them delivered,” You Dechuan said. “Chunxiao, open the chests and let me take a look.”

A servant came in and opened the chests. Madam Wang began to laugh as she said, “What kind of friend? Going to such trouble to deliver New Year’s gifts, too…”

You Dechuan glared at her, reproaching in a low voice, “Don’t laugh. This *friend* really is a tremendous character—one that not even the You family can hope to cozy up to!”

Meanwhile, You Miao had gone back to his room. He was upset when he entered, but his mood lightened after he took out the letter and shook it open, and went to sit on the stoop to read it by daylight.

The letter was from Zhao Chao.

“...Ever since our farewell that day, I’ve not known how you fared. After we parted ways, Yanbian’s defense troops were dispatched, and I took the liberty to report the enmity of our imprisonment. I now return to you all your lost articles. Please forgive me should there be any items missing…”

You Miao started to laugh; how very genteel this writing was. He continued to read.

“...I await the warm spring when flowers do bloom and that you will come to pay a visit to the capital. Your elder brother, Zhao Chao.”

You Miao refolded the letter properly, feeling warm. He hadn’t expected that Zhao Chao would treat him with such friendship after going through strife together. Except You Miao had no clue of this guy’s background—Zhao Chao had been wearing leather armor at the time, so he was probably an official. Perhaps an aristocrat. Or very possibly a young military officer; if that was the case, then his acquaintance with Nie Dan and asking him to deliver the chests would make sense. You Miao had stolen a glimpse in the main hall earlier; the chests had clearly been tethered to the sides of the horse’s back, so Nie Dan had no doubt ridden all the way with the burdens rocking his ride. What a tremendous effort. Had You Miao known sooner, he would’ve tipped him…

You Miao was deep in thought when the butler arrived.

“The master invites shaoye to dinner,” said Butler Lin, who had come personally.

“I’m not going,” You Miao said. “Have dinner delivered to my room. I’ll eat by myself.”

“The master says that the chests delivered from the capital—”

“He can do whatever he feels like with those,” You Miao said.

Butler Lin left. Shortly after, a servant arrived with dinner. You Miao ate while he pondered how to respond to Zhao Chao’s letter. Turning things over in his head, he suddenly thought he might as well just ask his old man for some money to go back to the capital tomorrow and move in with Li Yan. It’d beat suffering vexation at home.

Inside the main hall, You Dechuan, Madam Wang, and You Hange were sitting around the table. The butler reported that the young master would be taking his meal in his room. Madam Wang clicked her tongue in appreciation at the contents of the chests they opened—fox furs and wolf pelt coats from beyond the northern border, as well as deer antlers, tiger penis, tiger bones, and other such.

After a moment of thought, You Dechuan said, “Send him a couple of boxes of cured meats and wild hare from the table. Get some of every dish.”

There were plenty more additions to the chests than what You Miao had traded at Yanbian; Zhao Chao and his reinforcements had evidently captured the Tartars and stuffed the containers full of the spoils they seized —all of which were valuable goods from beyond the border.

“Laoye, look at this ginseng. This would cost at least ten taels in Pei City,” Madam Wang remarked.

You Dechuan snorted. “It’s my money to begin with. It’s not like I’ve ever denied him spending money…” He trailed off and shut up when he remembered that Madam Wang didn’t yet know about him sending You Miao money. He said instead, “You two can take what you like, then give the rest back to him.”

With a smile, You Hange said, “These are tokens of didi’s respect to you. The winters here in Jiangbei aren’t that cold; I’d have no use for this stuff, anyway. Maybe it’d be best if you hang on to these for him, Dad.”

Madam Wang had rolled her eyes at You Hange when he spoke; a small-minded gesture that didn't escape You Dechuan's notice. Choosing to ignore it, You Dechuan beckoned, "Let's just eat first. I'll go have another talk with the stubborn brat tomorrow."

The next day, You Miao went to the study with Li Zhifeng in tow, thinking of writing Zhao Chao back. When he pushed the door in, however, he unexpectedly came face to face with his father. You Hange was also present inside the room, listening respectfully to their father's lectures. The moment You Miao saw the two of them, he turned to leave.

"Just come in," You Dechuan said. "Feeling better?"

You Miao had taken his medication after breakfast. Thanks to Doctor Xing's miraculous skills, the acupuncture had worked wonders in relieving his sickness and he was left only with a residual cough. Nonetheless, he was gloomy-faced at the sight of the pair.

"I'll come back later."

"I've got things to say to you." You Dechuan leisurely set down his brush before continuing, "The other day, your older brother ran all the way down the mountain to get a doctor for you. I'm sure you know."

"My corpse would've gone cold by the time da-ge managed to get the doctor here," You Miao replied sarcastically.

"You—!"

It didn't take more than three sentences for You Miao to make You Dechuan fly into a rage. However, You Hange only smiled.

"Li Zhifeng was the one who got the doctor," You Hange said to You Dechuan. "Thank goodness he made it in time."

You Dechuan eyed Li Zhifeng, looking him up and down, before he said at last, "I heard Hange say that you ran back and forth twice that day, for a total of a hundred-and-sixty miles?"

Li Zhifeng only made a noise of affirmation and said nothing more.

"Thanks for the trouble," You Dechuan said. "It's not easy taking care of this brat, he's spoiled rotten."

You Dechuan was thinking of dismissing Li Zhifeng at first, but he was touched by his loyalty after hearing You Hange's story. It didn't matter who he was as long as he was genuinely protecting You Miao, in which case he shouldn't be mistreated. Thus was right.

After briefly contemplating, You Dechuan opened a desk drawer and took out some taels of silver, placing them at the edge of the table. "This is to reward you."

Li Zhifeng didn't approach to take the money, nor did he express his gratitude for the gesture. You Miao only thought it funny, and for the moment, the mood was frozen. You Dechuan also felt the awkwardness, and briefly after, he cleared his throat and called, "Miao-er."

Letter still in hand, You Miao regarded him coldly. Those lips, those eyes… He looked so much like Qiao Ke-er once had, when she was in her towering rage and vehemently refusing to concede—it was the expression You Dechuan despised the most in all his life. Every time he clashed with Qiao Ke-er and she refused to make any concessions, it would drive You Dechuan mad and leave him nowhere to vent.

"You. You're a lot like your mom," You Dechuan spoke slowly and emphatically, reining in his anger.

"I know you hate her," You Miao said. "I didn't know it before, but I do now. She tied you down for over ten years; you must hate her to death. Along with me, too, I bet."

You Hange's face fell. He looked at You Miao, then at You Dechuan.

"No." You Dechuan exhaled a long sigh, then said slowly, "I've wronged Ke-er. I've wronged you."

The abrupt declaration finally surprised You Miao.

"What is rightfully yours will not be short a single coin," You Dechuan continued. "In the future, whether it's you or your brother who enters court, the family assets will be evenly divided between the two of you. I've made this clear at the clan gathering, and I've also explained everything to your maternal uncles. Otherwise, wouldn't your little uncle be here kicking up a fuss as we speak?"

Seeing that You Dechuan had now laid everything out in the open with You Hange listening in on the side, You Miao didn't bother to evade him anymore, either.

You Miao snorted. "And how was little uncle to kick up a fuss?"

You Dechuan ignored him and continued, raising his eyes to stare at You Miao, "It's not time for you to take over the family business yet. You're not ready, and neither is your brother. I know this, at least."

You Hange bowed. "Father, I'm indeed incompetent."

You Miao knew he didn't have the best personality in the world. Technically speaking, he'd been in the capital to study, but in reality he'd been nothing but a wastrel himself under the pretense of getting acquainted with the nobility. There was no straightening out all this bad debt, but he regretted nothing. You Dechuan could afford to pay up, so it'd be a waste not to spend the money—even if he didn't, Madam Wang and her son would.

"I plan on going back to the capital in a few days," You Miao said. "Just pick out the good stuff from the stuff I brought back. I'll sell whatever's left and make some travel cash…"

You Dechuan laughed.

"Let me ask you: Why have you come here? To respond to your friend's letter?" You Dechuan asked.

You Miao only said what he had in order to find a reason to ask for money; since his father was speaking to him nicely, he couldn't make too ugly a scene. His expression softened slightly as he replied, "I'm writing a letter each to two of my friends at the capital."

"The one who sent you this letter?" You Dechuan asked.

"And another one," You Miao replied. "The Chancellor's son, Li Yan."

You Miao reached over and snatched for a piece of paper, but You Dechuan pressed his hand down on it to stop him.

"I can't have you going back to the capital this year."

You Miao instantly frowned. “Why not?”

“There are frequent skirmishes at the border; the north is probably unstable right now.”

You Miao let out a laugh in spite of himself. “Even if the north is unstable, it doesn’t mean the capital is indefensible. Old man, what are you thinking, exactly?”

“You idiot!” You Dechuan scolded. “The north being unstable means military conscription and increased taxation is inevitable. When the government mobilizes, it usually drafts most of the corvée labor from the Jiangnan and Jiangbei regions. If you’re pulled into the Third Prince’s faction, wouldn’t you be sending urgent calls home to ask for money?”

“I don’t have any connections with the Third Prince…” You Miao said.

“And what if it’s the Crown Prince who asks you for money?” You Dechuan demanded. “With the treasury empty, taxes will definitely hike on both sides of the Yangtze. When the time comes and Chancellor Li spurs the Emperor to borrow money from the salt and tea merchants, won’t I have to cough up the cash if you’re detained in the capital?”

You Miao snorted. After saying all that, it still circled back to You Dechuan’s love for his money. At first, You Miao had wanted to retort with “*If war does break out with the Barbarians and the country is thrown into chaos, you won’t be able to protect all of your assets regardless of how great you are.*” But on second thought, at the end of the day, the money belonged to You Dechuan. He could give it to whoever he liked—take it with him to the grave or be robbed by Barbarian was none of You Miao’s business.

After a brief thought, You Miao said, “Then what do you propose?”

“While your mom was alive, she sectioned off a piece of land,” You Dechuan said. “I thought about clearing it up fifteen years ago, but I’m in poor health and frequently falling ill, and I never got around to it. There are four tenant farmers watching over the estate, so if you want that land, you can have it. If you manage to grow something from it, then in three years

I'll have your brother go to the capital, and you take over the family business instead. You two can switch."

You Dechuan's speech tickled You Miao's funny bone, and he peered askance at You Hange as he listened. You Hange's skin was rough, and he looked very much like a country boy new to the city. Now that he was under the wing of a wealthy old dad and dressed up in silk brocades, he certainly looked the part of a young master—but that rube air about him couldn't be corrected. *Him*? Go to the capital? What could a hick accomplish? He knew nothing of gourmet, knew nothing of play; Li Yan and the others probably wouldn't spare him a single glance.

"I'm not going." You Miao's stubbornness spiked again. "What bullshit."

"You have to, even if you don't want to," You Dechuan said. "I don't have much more money for you."

"You—!"

"It's been decided; you can't go to the capital." You Dechuan said. "Your uncle also wrote to say the amount you spend a year is way out of line. This family doesn't have that kind of money for you…"

"Are you kidding me?" You Miao exclaimed. "You'd be short a couple thousand silver?! Give me back my stuff! *I'll* go to the capital with my *own* money!"

"What money? *You* have money? If it wasn't for *me* supporting you, what would you have to go befriend that pack of rabble…?!"

Rage was surging in You Dechuan again. However, the fault still lay with him; he couldn't wipe away the fact that he'd appointed another to be the eldest son. Just when he was about to keep calm and say more, You Miao sneered.

"*You're* supporting me? *You* have money? If it wasn't for *my mom* helping you back then, do you think you could've built the same fortune? Dream on! Kept man, old dog. My mom helped you secure such an immense asset, but you burn bridges the moment she's gone. Marrying a lover, recognizing a bastard…"

“Dad! Calm down!” You Hange exclaimed.

“*I’ll beat you to death, you little punk!*” You Dechuan screamed.

Before You Miao could finish his insult, an inkstone was already flying at his head. You Miao reflexively tried to dodge, but Li Zhifeng reached out as fast as lightning and caught it. Although neither of them were struck by the projectile, they were splashed with ink from head to toe and cut extremely sorry figures.

In all You Dechuan’s life, he hated the mention of this subject the most—how everyone on the outside would always imply that You Dechuan was a kept man. It filled him with such seething hatred that he could gnaw through his own teeth.

“Dad…” You Hange blocked his old father, repeatedly trying to talk him down and tell him to calm down, calm down. As for You Miao, with a head drenched in ink, he stomped right out of the study and into the corridors; all thoughts of writing letters completely gone.

“Dad! Dad!” You Hange cried.

You Dechuan was once again so angered by his little son that his face was drained of color, and he slumped back into the chair. You Hange quickly rubbed his father down to calm his breathing, then ran out with clenched fists to call for help, which alarmed Madam Wang who rushed over with a face white as a sheet.

CHAPTER 9

You Miao leaned against a pillar. He finally felt vindicated, yet for some reason, he also felt inexplicably exhausted. He huffed a breath, then turned around and hugged Li Zhifeng who stood behind him. The left half of Li Zhifeng's face was covered in ink, as was the right half of You Miao's. You Miao buried his face in Li Zhifeng's shoulder. Li Zhifeng wordlessly raised his hands and hugged You Miao back, and the two stood thus in the corridor, quietly embracing each other.

Just after noon the next day, more guests came calling at the tea estate. This time, it was the tea farmers and laborers who came to give their New Year gifts, and they crowded the yard in large numbers.

You Hange personally went to knock on You Miao's door, and he called from the outside, "Didi."

You Miao hadn't fully recovered from his cold, so when he sat up in bed, he was still coughing. Muqi-er greeted You Hange and bowed as he let him into the outer chamber.

"Is your cold better?" You Hange asked.

Still groggy from sleep, You Miao couldn't answer for the moment and only peered at him like a distrustful baby tiger.

"The tea farmers have come to greet the estate today," You Hange started to explain. "Dad wants you to go out and meet them, since they're our tenants, after all. There are some red pockets to be granted. Also, the uncles from Yang Prefecture have also come to pay a visit, why not come and see __"

"Got it," You Miao said crankily. "The old man is with the guests?"

"Yes," You Hange replied. "I don't know the etiquette, so I'm not sure how to deal with them… Originally, we were going to have Uncle Lin give

out the gifts, but dad said at least one of us should be there—”

“I’ll go,” You Miao cut him off coldly.

Throwing a tantrum was one thing, but You Miao was still sensible enough to recognize the time and place, as well as his duties. There were clansmen visiting today, and since You Dechuan had to keep them company and couldn’t get away, no doubt the ones who’d come were clan elders. If the new butler was sent to handle the tenants, and if he wound up being a stingy man, then not only would it cause discontent among the crowd, but You Miao would be dragged into the mess and shamed even if Madam Wang was the one who hired him. You Miao imagined that You Hange was probably also wary of the same thing, which was why he came to ask You Miao to take the reins.

You Miao rolled out of bed, wearing a single-layer robe. He coughed a few times, and You Hange immediately rushed forward to assist him.

“You only need to write down the amounts to give out,” You Hange said. “This here is a gift list. I had the servants pack the grants accordingly…”

You Miao waved him off. Li Zhifeng came over holding his outer robe and wrapped him in it.

“There’s no rush,” You Hange said. “Go after your meal. They can wait a bit longer.”

You Miao quickly washed up and changed, made do with a few bites of congee, then followed You Hange to his quarters. The red pockets You Hange mentioned were endowments of money granted to the tenant farmers, the amount of which was determined by what each individual gave the estate as a gift. Laying the gift list out on the table for reference, You Miao packed each endowment into individual red envelopes.

As he helped on the side, You Hange chided, “Didi, don’t be so mad at Dad anymore. He hasn’t been well enough to take being angry since last year.”

You Miao didn’t respond. He noticed that You Hange’s room was very crude, with not even a book on his desk. Although You Miao used to live in the main building, the rooms were rather plain now that it was tidied up.

There was only a single potted landscape[37] and a scroll on the wall with the verse: “The walker of a hundred miles is only halfway at ninety.[38]” Compared to the extravagance You Miao used to live in, this level of *grandeur* couldn’t even match You Deyou’s residence back at the capital.

Once You Miao finished with packing the envelopes, they were piled onto a platter that You Miao told a boy servant to hold as they headed to the front courtyard. Now it was You Hange who became the tail instead, following after You Miao.

“Shaoye,” a tenant who recognized You Miao greeted him with a smile. You Miao smiled back in response, then handed out the red pockets one by one.

Hundreds of tea farmers—those who shouldered carrying poles and those who pushed carts—were all standing there in the estate grounds. These people all counted on the lease renewal of the You family tea fields. At the end of each year when the busy season of picking winter sprouts was over, their bit of hope was that You Dechuan wouldn’t raise rent in the new year so they could all make a small bit of profit to feed their families.

“Fifteen jugs of pickles… Oh, I love eating these.” You Miao checked off the list with a smile. “Here. Your grant.”

The tea farmer who received the grant replied, also smiling, “Had I known shaoye loves ’em, I woulda started picklin’ at the beginning of the year. Me wife is always askin’ when You-shaoye will come back…”

“How thoughtful of you guys,” You Miao said.

Someone from the back of the line poked their head out and shouted, “Will rent go up next year, shaoye?”

“Nope!” You Miao answered.

The tea farmers relaxed, and soon, the grounds were filled with chatter and laughter.

“Two pairs of wild chickens, ten live ducks…”

You Miao checked off the list and handed out more envelopes to the tenants. The largest amount given was three to five taels of silver, and the

lowest was no less than five maces or a tael. These tenant farmers worked year-round for the You family; the tea they picked was sold to You Dechuan by weight, and there was an annual rent to pay to Sunshower Tea Estate. Thus, many of them counted on exchanging New Year gifts for grant money in order to spend over the holidays.

This was also a custom in the Jiangbei and Jiangnan regions: for every tenant farmer who didn't make enough income, the landlord must supplement their earnings with grants. Thus, the tenant farmers would bring any random thing when calling on the estate in order to exchange it for some grant money. It functioned as a prayer for good fortune, and simultaneously made celebrating New Year's easier. Moreover, it also facilitated continual labor for the landlord in the upcoming year.

"Four bushels of rice, a hundred pounds of red beans…five pounds of various cured meats…" You Miao started to laugh. "You hardy man; have you made a fortune?"

A beefy man gave a silly laugh. "My ma made me a match, and the wife's family helped out some…"

You Miao hooked his finger, gesturing You Hange to take out more money, then gave the man two extra taels of silver along with his grant. "On the day of the wedding, you don't need to come up here to invite us for a toast. Just kowtow once toward the estate, and that'll be good enough."

The smile on the beefy man's face bloomed like a flower, and he was immensely grateful when he left, hugging his money.

The exchange continued.

"Five live chickens… Ten live chickens…" Cages lined the grounds, all of them cooing. "A cart of cured fish… Ten jugs of rice wine…"

As You Miao handed out the grants, You Hange stood watching from the side with one hand over the other. When tenant farmers greeted him, he would smile and nod. It didn't take long before Madam Wang strolled over with Ma-yiniang and a bunch of maids in tow. You Miao glanced at her. Madam Wang and Ma-yiniang were both wrapped in the fox furs he'd brought back, looking dignified and sumptuous.

“Mom,” You Hange greeted.

Madam Wang nodded and watched You Miao hand out the grants from the side.

Another tenant farmer stepped forward, and he asked You Miao with a smile, “Shaoye, the rent won’t go up next year, yeah? Me dad and me have both done labor fer yer family fer forty years…”

“Rent won’t hike, don’t worry.” You Miao waved dismissively. “Just take good care of your dad. Go home and have a good New Year’s.”

Madam Wang’s face dropped immediately when she heard You Miao, but he ignored her. However, he felt inexplicably uncomfortable as long as Madam Wang was standing next to him. He knew Madam Wang was here to keep an eye on him, to make sure that he didn’t steal her son’s spotlight.

A wave of disgust washed over You Miao, and all of a sudden, he keenly felt it really was pointless to stick around at home. Why not just find a random place to go to—the sooner the better?

“Here. You do it.” You Miao motioned You Hange to take over, then turned to leave.

“Didi!” You Hange called to him from behind.

Feeling desolate, You Miao moped through the corridors. A breeze blew by, sending petals drifting through the yard.

When You Hange called to him, there *was* a sense of warmth deep down. Although he had a group of friends to hang out with during the three years he’d spent in the capital, he’d still been far away from home at the end of the day. It had been lonely and dreary. Whenever he happened to see Li Yian’s common-born younger brother while visiting his friend’s residence, Li Yan had never shown any fondness for the boy. His younger brother was forbidden to touch anything Li Yan played with or used, lest he break it. At the time, it had crossed You Miao’s mind how wonderful it would be if he had a sibling of his own. If he had a cute and mischievous little brother, he would never treat him the way Li Yan treated his. Yet You Miao didn’t know how to feel when a sibling really was thrust upon him—when there was now a You Hange added to the family.

He didn’t actually hate You Hange. In fact, he didn’t really hate Madam Wang, either. He just didn’t care to talk to either of them. Everyone was simply fighting for their own rights, that was all there was to it. As merchants always say, “Draw on advantages; avoid disadvantages.” And to put it more bluntly, “You’ll perish if you aren’t selfish.”

If he was to hate anyone, it would be his father, You Dechuan. His pathetic nature back then was the root cause of all this crappy business.

You Miao stopped. Behind him, Li Zhifeng stopped as well.

“Say something, you mute,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng’s brows knitted slightly.

“I don’t wanna stay at home anymore,” You Miao said. “It’s vexing.”

Li Zhifeng nodded.

“I’ll go to that whatever place my mom sectioned off while she was alive,” You Miao continued. “You wanna come with?”

Li Zhifeng nodded again. You Miao frowned slightly, and Li Zhifeng quickly spoke aloud.

“Yes. I’ll go wherever you go.”

You Miao was very satisfied with this response. He planned to ask his father for a sum of money, then to escape to somewhere far away and leave Sunshower Tea Estate behind. He would buy himself peace.

You Miao started off again, heading for the main hall. You Dechuan was in the middle of conversation with two granduncles; the women of the family had retreated to the west wing, accompanied by Ma-yiniang. You Miao tucked his hands in his sleeves, and smiled and nodded the moment he entered.

“Wu-shugong, Ba-shugong.[39] Dad.”

You Dechuan stopped his conversation, and Granduncle Wu spoke up.

“How’s our Miao-zi’s studies going at the capital?”

“Welp, I’ve come home to study,” You Miao said with a laugh. “Then to prepare to go to the capital for the imperial state exams in a few years.”

You Dechuan explained to the two elders, “Things haven’t been peaceful in the north these past few years.”

Granduncle Ba nodded. “Wasn’t Deyou’s caravan raided this winter?”

You Miao immediately piped up. “Yes, that’s right! I was part of that caravan…”

You Miao told the story vividly and vibrantly for the two granduncles, coloring his experience so much that the two elders looked horrified. You Dechuan’s face twitched nonstop while You Miao exaggerated the whole matter tenfold.

In the end, he concluded, “Thank goodness I bought a servant in the capital…”

This was also the first time You Dechuan had heard the story. He asked at the end, “Who was the City Watch officer at Yanbian? We’ll have to thank him properly.”

“Don’t know,” You Miao answered. “But there’s no need for that. If there’s a chance to thank him in the future, I’ll do it myself. By the way, Dad.” The other three in the hall turned to look at him. “Tomorrow, I’ll go to that whatever-it’s-called estate you told me about and clean it up. It’s my mom’s place, after all.”

“Riverwave Estate?” asked Granduncle Ba, shooting You Dechuan a glance.

You Dechuan’s expression soured, and Granduncle Wu said, “If you’re serious about studying for the exams, then there’s no need to go to Riverwave. What’s so good about that place?”

“I’m too restless at home to study,” You Miao explained with a smile. “I thought I’d get a change of scenery, and find a place that’s peaceful.”

“Stay at home,” You Dechuan said. “What’s the point of making more trouble for yourself?”

"Just let me go, Dad," You Miao said. "I miss my mom, anyway. The estate that Mom left me hasn't been looked after for so many years, and now I've got the time."

"It's not that I won't let you go," You Dechuan replied, "but Riverwave Estate is across the Yangtze. The winds and waves are stronger and more dangerous…it's not really a good place…"

You Miao snorted inwardly. *Didn't you just tell me yesterday to go? Why the change of heart after seeing some fellow clansmen, old fart?* "I'll go over there and learn how to take care of things," You Miao added. "So I can assist you better in handling the family business later in the future, no?"

Both the father and son had their own agendas in mind, and they exchanged a few words before the clan elders. The two granduncles were perceptive people themselves, and they could tell early on that the pair hadn't been getting along since You Miao's return.

Granduncle Wu was quiet for a moment before he spoke up. "Things have been tough for you, Miao-zi."

You Miao only laughed it off with a *heh-heh*.

"Dechuan, everything you said during the clan gathering must count," Granduncle Ba lectured. "Us old folk will become nothing but mounds of yellow earth in the future, and we'll have to rely on the younger generation to burn us joss paper. Qiao Ke-er helped you build this fortune, so you have to be conscientious of all that you owe instead of acting unfairly."

You Dechuan was sweating now, and he quickly agreed. "Yes, yes, of course, of course."

While they talked, the servants came in to lay out lunch, so You Dechuan instructed them to call You Hange to join their meal. During lunch, the clan elders bombarded You Miao with questions, but because You Miao had gone to the capital for three years and had grown distant from his relatives, he wasn't the most enthusiastic when answering. Meanwhile, You Hange only sat there, keeping them company with smiles as he ate.

That night, after You Miao returned to his room, he immediately began packing. Word of him leaving for Riverwave Estate had already spread

within the residence, and Madam Wang even went out of her way to give him some money.

The butler, holding said money, called from outside the door, “Shaoye, the Madam has charged me to come deliver this—”

“No need, but I appreciate the thought,” You Miao said.

None of the other servants came to help You Miao pack; it was only Li Zhifeng running around inside the chamber putting things away. There were six trunks in total by the end.

The butler came to call again. “Shaoye, the master has requested you in the study—”

“Tell him not to bother, I’m not coming home for New Year’s,” You Miao replied.

The butler didn’t stick around to say more and left to go make his report. A short while later, he returned with a land deed. “The master asks shaoye to keep this. This bit of money is for shaoye to use once he is over there.”

Muqi-er brought in the deed and the account ledger for Riverwave Estate. You Miao briefly skimmed through it under the lamp.

“Muqi-er, go with the butler,” You Miao said. “You don’t need to wait on me for the time being. Li Zhifeng is enough.”

Muqi-er stood there, his lips moving, but he couldn’t speak for the longest time. Having squeezed out a couple of tears, he mumbled at last, “Shaoye…”

You Miao didn’t want to bring Muqi along, so as to not hold him back. He knew Muqi didn’t want to go—it’d be better if he was dismissed now instead making him follow You Miao all the way to the other estate. Besides, everyone else had already been reassigned except Muqi-er, who was the sole servant left in You Miao’s room. Madam Wang must’ve talked to him beforehand; You Miao figured he must’ve been charged with something along the lines of keeping an eye on him. Leaving Muqi at the estate was also saving him from that difficult position.

You Miao wanted to spend New Year's at Riverwave Estate, then after the holiday, he would see what he could make of it. You Miao's wishful abacus was clacking soundly away in his mind—he would use Riverwave Estate's land deed as collateral and take out a ten-year loan from Yang Prefecture, which would be at least five to six thousand taels of silver. He could then take that money and go to the capital, where he would spend a little to get the son of the Minister of Revenue to issue him a permit, then purchase a bunch of goods and go sell at the border.

After buying and selling like this a few times, You Miao would be in the black, and then it would only be a matter of time before mountains of gold and silver were his. You Miao was infinitely optimistic about his future prospects. It was like he was holding two eggs and already having grand visions of those eggs hatching chickens, and those chickens laying more eggs. He soon drifted from his great imagination into slumberland.

You Miao's sleep was restless that night and he was awake before dawn broke the next day. "What time is it?" he asked.

In the outer chamber, Li Zhifeng rolled over and got up to attend to him. "The fifth watch, just before dawn.[40]"

You Miao had wanted to lie around for a bit longer, but then he felt that he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep even if he were to continue doing so. He thought he might as well get up earlier and finish packing. Since he hadn't gotten up and was only rolling the edges of his blanket, Li Zhifeng lay back down. However, when You Miao pushed himself to sit up in bed, Li Zhifeng also got up as if he could read his mind. He donned his outer robe and walked in while he tied his belt, ready to assist You Miao in washing up.

"Is everything packed?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng made an affirming noise, and You Miao said, "We have to bring the books."

"Half the carriage is books," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao regarded Li Zhifeng inside the mirror, and a strange feeling suddenly washed over him. He reached out and rubbed Li Zhifeng's large

hand, and Li Zhifeng looked up to gaze at the You Miao inside the mirror.

"Thank goodness you're here with me," You Miao said with a laugh. "Otherwise, I wouldn't know what I'd do by myself—coming back from the capital and ending up like such a stray."

The corners of Li Zhifeng's lips quirked upward. Once You Miao was dressed, Li Zhifeng stayed standing by his side, at the ready.

Winter nights were long, so it was still dark outside the estate. The boy servants came and secured the trunks onto the carriage, the back of which was weighed down by books that took up half of the vehicle. You Miao didn't want to bother saying anything more to his father, nor did he go to bid him farewell, so he simply stood there beside the carriage puffing hot breaths that turned into white mist.

"Shaoye," Muqi-er called.

"Once things have settled down over there and I'm in need of service, I'll still have you go over," You Miao said. "But keep that to yourself. Don't talk too much."

Muqi-er nodded fervently. You Miao then looked at the group of boy servants. He had wanted to pick a few who had cleaner eyes and bring them to run errands and save Li Zhifeng from doing all the work. But looking them up and down, left and right, he found it to be pointless. Their loyalties had likely already been bought by Madam Wang; rather than keeping spies at his side, he might as well buy new help once he was at the new place.

You Dechuan had given him a hundred taels of silver the day before. A hundred silver. He could spend all of that in less than a month in the capital, yet now, there wasn't much left to spare even if he asked. He would have to spend very carefully and frugally.

As You Miao packed away the money, the land deed, and Riverwave Estate's ledgers, someone came sprinting over from the second entrance, shouting, "Didi! Didi!"

You Miao was just about to mount the carriage, he had a foot already on the step, but he came back down when he saw it was You Hange who had come.

You Hange was gasping for breath after the run. “Why didn’t you wait for Dad to get up to say goodbye?”

You Miao regarded him and saw that You Hange hadn’t yet dressed properly, his clothes still in disarray. “What do you want?” he said gruffly.

“Gege will see you off,” You Hange said.

You Miao didn’t want them to use such brotherly terms at first; even though he knew none of the affairs were his fault, he just couldn’t let it go. But You Miao felt bad after seeing how submissively You Hange had been acting. He had suffered the pain of not having a mom when he was young, and for You Hange, it had been the loss of a dad. He’d lived the past seventeen years the same way You Miao had. And most importantly, the blood of the You family flowed in both their veins; he *had* to recognize this older brother, even if he didn’t want to. Ignoring him was one thing, not recognizing him was something else entirely. Just like a father, You Miao could pretend he didn’t know his him, but his existence was real.

“I don’t hate you, da-ge,” You Miao blurted.

You Hange was taken aback. He didn’t expect You Miao to cut straight to the point so bluntly. After contemplating briefly, he said, “In the past, I’ve always…I’ve always wanted a little brother. Miao-zi, I…”

“I know. This isn’t your fault,” You Miao said. “I’m off. ’Til we meet again.”

You Hange fumbled out a small pouch from his robes and handed it to You Miao. “I got this for you…”

You Miao looked at the shabby little pouch, then met his gaze. He was about to leave, there was no point in getting angry, so he might as well give You Hange a chance to reconcile. That way, when the old fart kicked the bucket in the future, it would be easier to speak up if he needed anything.

You Miao took the pouch. It was a bit heavy—it probably contained some broken silvers. He nodded, then turned around to mount the carriage. “I’m off.”

Li Zhifeng raised the whip, and the resounding *crack* rang clear and crisp in the foggy early morning. You Hange stood at the front entrance gate of the estate to see them off, and watched the two horses draw the carriage as You Miao and Li Zhifeng departed. The wheels creaked along the mountain road, and they turned and disappeared into the distance.

Inside the coach, You Miao's expression was wooden. Right now, Sunshower Tea Estate and the perpetually foggy Liu Prefecture lay behind him, and neither seemed to have anything to do with him any longer.

As the sun rose and the fog dispersed, the songs of the tea-picking girls echoed sweetly from the valleys.

With a carriage, a few belongings, and their mutual companionship, the two of them headed toward You Miao's new life.

Arc 1 End

ARC 2: THE BUTTERFLY'S LOVE FOR THE FLOWER

蝶恋花 春景

【宋】苏轼

花褪残红青杏。燕子飞时，绿水人家绕。

枝上柳绵吹又少，天涯何处无芳草！

墙里秋千墙外道。墙外行人，墙里佳人笑。

笑渐不闻声渐悄，多情却被无情恼。

The Butterfly's Love for the Flower - Spring Scenery

Su Shi (1037-1101) Song Dynasty

Red flowers wilt, green buds sprout,

Swallows fly, gliding about.

Blue waters encircle the country homes.

Willow catkins lessen; blown away, alas!

But there is no place unthriving in that sweet, green grass.

Within the walls, a maiden swings,

The maiden laughs, enchanting.

Outside the walls, a stranger stops, enthralled.

As the laughter subsides, fading to nothing,

The spell breaks, to leave a rude awakening.

This poem depicts the refreshing loveliness of spring while simultaneously expressing the poet's lament over the season's passing, which further illustrates his trouble of having no one to know his feelings.

CHAPTER 10

Since historical times, Liu Prefecture had been a place bountiful in resources. As it had escaped the chaos of war for centuries, it was the home of fish and rice in the southern region of the nation. In particular, the millions of acres of rolling hills were the largest land available in the Yangtze River basin for growing and picking tea.

Riverwave Estate wasn't close to Sunshower Tea Estate, but it also wasn't far. It was about four hundred miles from Pei County, and reachable within a day and night on an urgent horse. However, You Miao was in no hurry and was hauling an entire carriage's worth of luggage, so he traveled at a leisurely pace with frequent stops along the route. He stopped by Pei County's capital city for a few days in the hopes of paying Doctor Xing a visit to thank him, but as he was out visiting patients, You Miao could only drop off his thank-you gift and continue on his way.

The journey was one of winding roads. After passing Jiang Prefectural City, they headed toward the border of Yang Prefecture. Riverwave Estate sat at the crossroads of the Su, Yang, and Liu Prefectures, with most of it in Jiangnan and the rest of it in Jiangbei.

The boundaries of this estate certainly were a headache, as both the Yang and Liu prefectures used to dispute the land. There was Guozhuang Village in the south and Anlu Village in the north, and the villagers of both once fought over a pier so hard that it resulted in a number of casualties. The village chiefs reported the incident to the county magistrates, and the magistrates reported it to the prefectural governors—which caused the governors to start fighting, too. In the end, the matter was set aside, then ditched.

Since then, Riverwave Estate unapologetically sat across both the south and the north, cut in half by a section of the harsh-winded and turbulent-waved Yangtze shoal.

At first, You Miao knew none of this. Originally he'd been quite excited to try his hand at achieving great things, but he discovered that this really wasn't a good location now that he'd seen the landscape. Everything else aside, if he should want to inspect his own estate once a day, he would have to run from Jiangbei to Jiangnan thanks to the river—would he have to take a ferry halfway just to go home for dinner?!

You Miao couldn't help but put his hand over his face and droop. Why did his dear old mom pick such a useless piece of land? He then went to rummage through his chest of books.

Li Zhifeng asked from outside the coach, "Looking for food?"

"Looking for a book," You Miao replied.

You Miao dug out the *Liu Prefecture Guide* and began to compare it to the record his father had put together, but when he caught sight of Li Zhifeng who was driving the carriage, he called out, "You tired? Come in and take a break if you are."

"I should rest and let the horses run on their own?" Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao laughed. He didn't think Li Zhifeng would ever joke. "I'll drive."

"No," Li Zhifeng rejected him without sparing a single look back. "You'll run us off the road."

You Miao pulled open the coach door, and the wan rays of the winter sun poured in almost tangibly. After leaving Jiang Prefectural City, the last stretch of their journey was nothing but clear skies and a warm sun that spilled its gleaming light across the earth. It instantly brightened You Miao's mood.

Bringing his books with him, You Miao went to sit on the driver's seat plank too. He covered Li Zhifeng's eyes with both hands and said with a laugh, "Now you can't see, ha ha!"

Li Zhifeng's lips quirked upward, but he continued to drive, unaffected. At first, You Miao thought Li Zhifeng would say something along the lines

of “Don’t play around.” Who would’ve thought the man was perfectly fine with this?

“Hey, aren’t you scared of crashing the carriage?” You Miao asked, dubious.

“No.” A small smile hung from Li Zhifeng’s lips. “I can hear.”

You Miao dropped his hands and stuck his fingers into Li Zhifeng’s ears. “How about now?”

Li Zhifeng grinned. “Now I can see again.”

“*Tsk*—!”

Li Zhifeng burst out laughing, and that stunned You Miao. This was actually the very first time he’d seen him laugh so happily in all the time he’d known him. You Miao stared in a daze; Li Zhifeng’s smile under the sun was candidly handsome and singularly captivating. You Miao gulped.

Li Zhifeng turned his head to regard You Miao, his wide smile fading, and he shook his head with a small grin. Inwardly, You Miao thought, *This guy is so handsome… No, actually, not quite. There’s a scar on his eyebrow and a tattoo on his neck. His looks definitely aren’t like the delicate comeliness aristocrats have, and his skin color is also on the darker, rougher side. But with those deep blue eyes, that lean narrow face and tall nose…there’s something else about him that fascinates.*

Even the blade scar that cut across his straight left eyebrow was inexplicably attractive.

“Did that scar on your eyebrow come from Li Yan’s beatings?”

“No.” Li Zhifeng’s attention wasn’t on the road, gazing instead into You Miao’s eyes. He answered in a whisper, “This is a scar from when I first went out to battle. It was an arrow wound.”

As he spoke, he leaned in and softly kissed You Miao on the lips. You Miao’s heart instantly started to thump in his chest, like something was being lit on fire. This wasn’t the first time he and Li Zhifeng had kissed. All of Li Zhifeng belonged to him; he could kiss him whenever he wanted and order him around and the man would have to obey. He usually used Li

Zhifeng as a cushion to lean on and ordered him around, but none of that stirred feelings in him. But now, he was experiencing something different.

After the kiss, Li Zhifeng's focus returned to the road ahead, but You Miao noticed a very faint smudge of red on his cheeks. You Miao started to chuckle, but didn't comment as he leaned into Li Zhifeng's arms. Thus, Li Zhifeng extended an arm and held him close while the other hand kept a grip on the reins. Although the year hadn't yet ended, the winter sun was brightening their moods. The wind wasn't strong either, so You Miao let himself laze like this under the sun as he flipped through his books.

The original plan had been to reach Riverwave Estate by dusk, but with a path that turned and winded left and right, they actually got lost after leaving the official road. They stood at a fork, and You Miao mumbled as he looked around and compared the paths with his parchment map, "That's not right. We *definitely* saw the boundary stone of Yang Prefecture earlier."

Li Zhifeng lowered his head and read using the last light of the setting sun, "Head south along the prefecture border…"

A flock of crows cawed in the distance as the skies darkened. The night came faster in the winter, and they were in the middle of nowhere. There were large fields of neatly bent rice stalks everywhere, but not a single house in sight.

You Miao only had one meal this morning, back in Jiang Prefectural City. He had depleted the dry rations they had packed for the road and was now hungry again. The temperature dropped as the night deepened, and as their carriage rolled on, it suddenly tilted to the side.

"Watch out!" Li Zhifeng called out immediately, and barked at the horse, "Go, go!"

All the stuff inside the carriage tumbled to the right. The wheel twisted and got stuck in a mud puddle, and the entire vehicle tipped over on the roadside.

Before the woeful Li Zhifeng could say anything, You Miao staggered out of the coach saying, "I'm fine, it's fine."

Once out, You Miao yelled toward the open county, feeling apprehensive, “Is anybody there?”

The wilderness was empty and deserted, but it felt as if there was something watching them with predatory eyes. Sharp wolf howls sounded from the far distance. The crows began to caw in agitation, then flapped their wings and took off.

You Miao saw several pairs of glowing green dots drifting about the vast fields, and a cold shudder ran down his back.

“W-w-wh…what’s that? Wolves?” You Miao asked, reaching for Li Zhifeng to hide behind him.

“Don’t be scared,” Li Zhifeng soothed.

“H-h-had…had I known, we would’ve packed your bow and arrows…” You Miao stammered.

“They’re packed,” Li Zhifeng said. “They’re in the trunks.”

Li Zhifeng turned around and climbed into the carriage. It was pitch-black all around; not even the moon was visible in the night sky. You Miao fumbled out a flintstone on the dark road and tried striking it to start a light.

Li Zhifeng re-emerged with a bow on his back and a quiver in his hand. “Come back inside the carriage.”

You Miao was both cold and famished when he sat inside the coach anew. Just as Li Zhifeng was about to close the door, however, You Miao stopped him.

“Don’t, don’t close it.”

You Miao placed the heater on the seat and shrank into Li Zhifeng’s arms, making him hold him. Li Zhifeng only gave a casual scan of the area before he shook open a throw blanket to cover You Miao.

“Don’t be scared.” Li Zhifeng’s voice was impassive, without feeling, but was nonetheless steady and reliable. “Even if there are wolves, they wouldn’t dare come over.”

“You’ve seen wolves before?” You Miao asked.

“There are plenty beyond the border…” Li Zhifeng explained. “The breeds in the Central Plains are only mountain wolves. The wolves of the great desert beyond the Wall run in large packs and are much more aggressive than the ones here.”

As they spoke, another howl sounded in the distance. This time, You Miao heard it clearly.

“How do you chase away desert wolves?” You Miao asked in a small voice. “Would lighting fires help?”

Li Zhifeng absentmindedly stroked You Miao’s head as he replied, “When I ran into them in the great desert, I didn’t have fire at the time, nor did I have my bow and arrows; only a scimitar. Around twenty desert wolves came, and they formed a pack.”

The story terrified You Miao, and immediately there was another howl in the darkness. Since the night was quiet, the cry was loud and clear. The few wolves that were around sounded like they were prowling ever closer.

“What did you do, then?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng started, “I…”

You Miao sensed Li Zhifeng pause. His chest rose like he was inhaling deeply, and then…

“*Woo*—!”

Li Zhifeng made some sort of barking noise, then let loose a clear, resounding wolf howl from deep within his throat. It was a powerful and vigorous sound, like a lone wolf compelled to sing beneath the moonlight. So strong was it that You Miao’s ears buzzed with its reverberation.

The mountain wolves’ cries ceased, and the green glint of their eyes disappeared; it was as though they had sensed danger in Li Zhifeng’s howl. A gust of wind blew past, rustling the grass, and then all was quiet once more.

“What happened after you howled?” You Miao asked.

“The alpha of the pack came forward to challenge me,” Li Zhifeng replied.

Li Zhifeng held You Miao with his left arm while he idly toyed with a wooden arrow with his right hand, twirling it between his long, slender fingers. The shimmer of the arrowhead was a singular light in the dark night.

“And then?” You Miao pressed.

“I killed it, of course,” Li Zhifeng replied. “I also got bitten a few times, so I lay there in the desert all by myself.”

You Miao pictured Li Zhifeng covered in blood, lying there with the corpse of the wolf king. “Did the wolf pack not come after you?”

“No,” Li Zhifeng said mildly.

“Then what were you doing laying there?”

“Moon-watching,” Li Zhifeng answered quietly.

The great desert, the bright moon, the wolf pack…and Li Zhifeng, who lay beneath that silver light in the middle of the desert.

Snow on Tian Shan brought sea wind so cold,

"Tough March," the tune from a flute did mourn,

In the moraine trudged three hundred thousand brave,

And to the moon their heads turned to gaze.[41]

As You Miao cuddled into Li Zhifeng’s embrace, he somehow fell asleep imagining that faraway scene. Amidst the stillness of the deep night, however, there seemed to be the barking of dogs and voices of strangers coming from the distant end of the road.

Li Zhifeng’s ears twitched, and the twirling of the arrow stopped. He loosened the arm holding You Miao and laid him on his lap while he picked up the longbow that was set beside them. He nocked the arrow on the bow and pulled the string taut, pointing the weapon toward the pitch-black road.

The voices were nearer now.

“Could they have run into wolves…?”

“They’ve been traveling all night and still haven’t arrived…”

Li Zhifeng squinted his eyes. The clouds dispersed then—a full moon hung in the sky above, illuminating their surroundings.

You Miao roused. When he opened his eyes and saw Li Zhifeng with the bow pulled and at the ready, he immediately turned in the direction of the voices. A dog was barking viciously, but it was quickly hushed by the villagers holding its leash.

The villagers exclaimed when they caught sight of the two.

"It's the young master!"

"You-shaoye!"

"We've finally found you…"

Li Zhifeng lowered his bow, and as You Miao fully awoke, he realized that these men had come to receive him.

The tenant farmers gathered around the pair, babbling and talking over each other to ask questions. As it turned out, they were five miles away from Riverwave Estate. After going through half a night's worth of hassle, You Miao was drained in both body and spirit. The tenant farmers helped push the horse-drawn carriage out of the gutter, and with one man in front leading the way, they escorted You Miao and Li Zhifeng to the estate under the bright light of the moon.

You Miao passed out completely for the rest of the night. When he woke the next day, he found himself on an old rackety bed covered with the blankets he brought from home. He was itchy all over, and after a few light scratches, he yawned and sat up. He was promptly startled by a disheveled, loose-haired Li Zhifeng who bolted upright from the ground.

"What is this place?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng tied his hair as he answered, "Riverwave Estate."

Then, he rose to his feet and went out to draw water for You Miao to wash up.

Still sitting in bed huddled in his blankets, You Miao looked the place over. He vaguely remembered how they had arrived the night before, though his head was already hazy from sleepiness by the middle of the

night and everything about the trip to the estate had been a blur. Li Zhifeng had been driving the carriage up front while he slept inside the coach. Once they arrived, the tenant farmers didn't say much either before leading them inside. Li Zhifeng had said something to him when he entered the coach but You Miao no longer remembered the words.

"What did you say to me last night?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng answered over the sound of water. "I said that I'd tidy up the side chamber first, and we'll make do with it for the night. I'll clean up the main house today."

You Miao nodded. Through the window lattice, he saw Li Zhifeng pour water from a wooden bucket into a copper basin before coming back inside to place the basin over the brazier to heat.

"I can do it," You Miao said.

He knew that this was not the time to sit around waiting to be waited on. There were many things he would have to do himself, since this was a new environment where he knew nothing and no one. Besides, he hadn't hired anyone new yet—there was only Li Zhifeng, who was genuinely good to him, but good iron should be used for weapons; he shouldn't rely on Li Zhifeng for every little thing. It wouldn't be worth it if Li Zhifeng dropped dead from exhaustion.

"Just rest," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao got out of bed and started to dress himself. "I figure since we're here, everything will have to be simpler for now."

He then pushed the window open. It was a radiant winter day and the sun outside was beaming, spilling its rays across the endlessly vast fields. The scent of the open country filled You Miao's nostrils, and it brightened his mood immensely.

"What do they plant out here?"

You Miao had never lifted a finger, nor could he even tell turnips from corn. But as he leaned out the window and looked around, it suddenly

dawned on him that everything here was his. The house was his, the fowl and fish, the rivers, the hills, the woods…it all belonged to him.

"Don't know," Li Zhifeng replied.

He came to You Miao's side with a towel to help wash his ears and face. Once dressed, You Miao dropped his feet to the floor to put on his shoes.

"Let's go out and take a look around today," You Miao said.

"Mn," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao then asked, "What are we doing for breakfast?"

When You Miao voiced this question, he finally realized they had a big problem. This place wasn't anything like Sunshower Tea Estate—there was no cook, no servants. Everything had to be done by his own hand.

"The women of the tenant families delivered breakfast," Li Zhifeng said.

Delighted, You Miao went outside. As soon as he stepped out of the side chamber, however, he was dumbfounded.

The sun was still glorious, but the yard was a dilapidated, desolate mess. The foot of the enclosure wall was piled high with chipped and mossy earthenware, the cracks of the stone tiles sprouted with weed overgrowths that were still expanding, the spirit screen crawled with ivy, and the pulley of a well lay to its side, broken from decay.

You Miao hadn't bothered to look carefully the night before when Li Zhifeng carried him in. Now that he was seeing everything in broad daylight, it was a completely different sight.

"Interesting," You Miao said to Li Zhifeng.

You Miao traversed through the corridor and headed to the front courtyard with Li Zhifeng in tow. Most of the tiles of the corridor roof had cracked and fallen, and the enclosure walls of the backyard at the far end had all but collapsed. The sky was clear with not a cloud as You Miao glanced across the landscape.

This crappy place… You Miao was struck speechless, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Yet for some reason, this scenery presented a

particular tranquility; paradise-like. Perhaps this was the reason why his mother had fallen in love with Riverwave Estate and purchased this land.

Without any nearby mountain ranges, the view was unobstructed and wide; clouds rolled softly on the horizon. As long as he put his heart into fixing this place and sprucing it up, this estate could transform into something beautiful given enough time.

“This is my first time living in a house like this,” You Miao said with a smile. Li Zhifeng nodded, but when they reached the front yard, You Miao’s smile dropped.

How was this an estate manor?! It was practically a broken temple!

The doors, the windows, the tables, the chairs—everything had crumbled. There was not a single piece still whole, and cobwebs crawled everywhere. A few women were conversing at the end of the corridor, but they scattered the moment they saw You Miao and Li Zhifeng.

“Oh, hey! Where are you going?” You Miao called to them.

The way the women dressed made them seem both dirty and destitute, so they rushed to hide in the back of the house. You Miao figured that they weren’t used to seeing strangers and were thus scared, so he didn’t say much more. He crossed the threshold to enter the main hall, but there was not a spot inside where he could put his foot down. In front of the dark and gloomy back wall was a pot of noodles, two chipped bowls, and a plate of salted veggies.

“...Did we bring bowls?” You Miao asked after a speechless pause.

“No.”

Li Zhifeng took the chopsticks on the table and brought them outside, thinking of washing them, but there was a thick mantle of leaves and moss covering the well.

“I’ve got water here,” said a man’s voice.

Li Zhifeng took the half-filled bucket from the tenant who had spoken and used it to wash the chopsticks thoroughly.

The tenant then asked, “Is the young master up?”

“Go wait outside the second entrance, all of you,” Li Zhifeng said. “You will be summoned when he is done with breakfast.”

The tenants thus all left. You Miao grinned as he listened to Li Zhifeng—the way he spoke had a faint air of a butler. Moments later, You Miao dug in and randomly ate some of the prepared breakfast. Although the food was just plain noodles mixed with a dash of salt, You Miao easily wolfed down half a pot after starving for an entire night. His only thought was that the noodles were delightfully tender, and the pickled radishes were crispy and delicious—simply heavenly.

Usually, at home, dishes like these weren’t even spared a glance. Riverwave Estate seemed to be quite destitute, however, if not even an egg was served with the noodles. What You Miao didn’t know was that for typical impoverished families, having fine rice alone was pure fantasy. A simple serving of a crude steamed bun paired with some pickles would’ve taken care of a meal—the white flour noodles were already a show of heart.

Once You Miao was done eating, he pushed the bowl toward Li Zhifeng.

“Eat. Work is done better on a full stomach.” After Li Zhifeng ate the remaining noodles, he added, “The only one left I can depend on is you. Put your heart into your work.”

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao of course knew that Li Zhifeng was very attentive to him, so what he’d just said was meaningless nagging. Truthfully, it was simply that he was feeling unsteady on his feet. After he had taken over this rundown manor, he was a little scared of going out for fear that they would see the rest of the estate was even more broken down.

But since he’d come, he had to tidy it up no matter what.

You Miao more or less understood that if it wasn’t for its decrepitude, Riverwave Estate would never have come into his hands. Four tenant farmers and two hundred acres of land; discounting the fields east of the estate, as the rest was just wasteland. There was no one available to clear all that virgin land, since each tenant farmer took care of about one acre—they couldn’t handle more even if they wanted to.

The first order of business was to clear the land, and have people grow and harvest crops. However, in order to grow crops, the land would need to be tilled. While there were two hundred acres of land on paper, a portion of that was hills. Discounting them, maybe just over two-thirds of the total land could truly be cultivated.

One hundred-and-thirty acres… Spring and autumn would produce a season of rice each; one thousand square feet could produce six hundred pounds, or twelve bushels, of rice. After taking away each tenant farmer's rations and rent, You Miao could sit and collect the rest. If he could lease out all one hundred-and-thirty acres of land, then he could rake in several thousand of silver in pure profit annually.

Of course, this would be in the most ideal of scenarios. In reality, You Miao didn't have the labor he required, and the wasteland needed to be cleared as well—not to mention taxes. Based on their current situation, with four tenant households and one acre each, You Miao would be thanking his lucky stars if he could make even one hundred silver.

The current most troublesome issue was that there was no water on this estate. Rice was a water-intensive crop; it required water to grow, but water was a major issue here. Arable land could yield three seasons of rice; non-arable land could yield only one season, and two would be pushing it. Without irrigation, the farmers had to work hard to carry water from the wells, and the fields they could cover were limited when help was lacking. They had to depend on the heavens as well to see how much it rained—there couldn't be too much, lest the seedlings drown.

"Come, tell me. What're your names?"

With the ledger in hand, You Miao didn't bother holding himself with the air of a young master and sat by the guardian lion stone as soon as he emerged. The tenant farmers had been waiting outside the second entrance for a long time, and they quickly bowed in greeting when they saw You Miao come out.

"To answer shaoye," one man spoke up, "this humble one is surnamed Li. The name is Li Zhuang."

You Miao nodded, then eyed the four men appraisingly. They must all be the heads of the tenant families. The man named Li Zhuang looked to be about fifty years old. Next to him was a rickety old man, and beside the old man was a tallish young man. The last one was a skinny man.

The old man was a tenant farmer too?

Li Zhuang introduced each person to You Miao. The old man was Old Uncle Liang, the young man was Zhang Er, and the skinny man was Zhu Tang.

“Liang-bo is still working the fields?” You Miao asked.

“The harvests are getting worse every year!” Old Uncle Liang exclaimed, his brows quivering. “Who knows how many more years we can farm the land.”

The others traded looks, but no one spoke up. You Miao was taken aback at first, but then understood immediately. In the past, Sunshower Tea Estate had always sent someone over to collect rent. Now that You Miao had personally come and took over the management of the estate, the tenants more or less harbored their own little agendas, hoping to extract a promise to keep rent the same in order to make a living next year.

“Rent won’t hike,” You Miao said, already having thought about this on the road. “But on one condition.”

“Shaoye, we have come with the intention of bidding you farewell,” Li Zhuan unexpectedly said.

You Miao was taken aback again. Finished with his breakfast, Li Zhifeng emerged from the house and stood behind You Miao. His presence helped, and You Miao calmed down somewhat.

“What? Farewell?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhuang was obviously the leader of the group, and they had already discussed the matter among them, so he said without hesitation, “Life isn’t passable here. Shaoye, I want to take my family to Yang Prefecture and find work there.”

“Shaoye, I have to go, too,” the young man Zhang Er also said. “Both my mom and dad are gone, there’s only me left in the family. I can’t take care of all this land, and I can’t find a wife this way, either. I plan on going to my uncle’s in the capital come spring.”

You Miao turned to look at the skinny man. Zhu Tang seemed hesitant as he said, “I…I gotta go, too. This land can’t be farmed anymore, I might as well go fish for a living.”

“Uncle Liang is also getting on in age,” Li Zhuang said. “Also, Uncle Liang’s son is earning a royal salary in the army in Liu Prefecture, and he doesn’t want his father to continue doing hard labor and working the land.”

You Miao had never thought that this would be the dilemma he had to face when coming to Riverwave Estate. Not only was the estate itself barren and the manor run-down, even the tenant farmers no longer planned on continuing their leases. If these four houses left, then Li Zhifeng and You Miao would be the only people left in the entire Riverwave Estate.

You Miao found the situation a little funny. “Is the harvest really that bad? So bad that none of you can feed your families?”

No one spoke, and You Miao didn’t say anything in an attempt to retain them, either.

“If you’re set on leaving, then…do as you will,” he said casually. “Wait here for a moment.”

You Miao went into the house and grabbed a bit of broken silver from the horse-drawn carriage parked in the backyard. He packed four envelopes with a tael of silver each, then he re-emerged and passed them to the four tenants.

“I looked through the land deed and the ledger, so I know your four families have worked the Riverwave Estate for many decades. This bit of money is a show of my goodwill. If you want to come back in the future, the doors are open for you any time.”

Three of the farmers were astonished, while the young man, Zhang Er, took the grant without qualms. He cupped his hands and saluted You Miao.

“Thanks, shaoye.”

You Miao waved him off, gesturing that it was nothing, and the group left. As he watched their retreating backs, You Miao felt mixed emotions.

Li Zhifeng had been standing behind You Miao with hands dropped as his sides, and once everyone was gone, You Miao asked him, “Did you notice?”

“Yes.” Li Zhifeng nodded. “Not all of them will leave.”

You Miao rose to his feet and started strolling through the yard.

“The skinny guy most likely won’t; he only followed in the others’ footsteps to seek some benefits. The old man might not leave, either—someone who’s farmed their whole life wouldn’t be comfortable living in the city. The young man, though… Both of his parents are gone, so if he has lofty ambitions, it’s no surprise that he doesn’t want to farm.”

“Li Zhuang’s position is hard to determine,” Li Zhifeng said. “He might not leave if you lower the rent.”

You Miao nodded, really feeling the headache now. “Is Riverwave Estate’s land really that infertile?”

“I don’t know anything about farming,” Li Zhifeng replied.

It was time to learn. Right now, You Miao didn’t even have a clue about his estate’s state of production. He had run over so impulsively, and now that he was here and saw the situation, he imagined that there would be no buyers even if he wanted to sell off the land for profit.

And he couldn’t just sell the land his mother left him, either.

You Miao focused and thought things through. “Let’s walk around. There’s no hurry in tidying up the house.”

As You Miao and Li Zhifeng walked toward the main entrance, You Miao commented, “More than half of Riverwave Estate is a wasteland.”

Li Zhifeng made a sound of acknowledgment. “We’ll need a way to clear it.”

“Indeed,” You Miao agreed. “But I don’t know what’s suitable to be planted here—if it’s suited to grow anything at all.”

You Miao held Li Zhifeng’s hand, and the two walked side by side as they went around the spirit screen covered in ivy. You Miao mumbled to himself as he contemplated.

“It might be tough for the first couple of years, and since no one is willing to farm the land, we’ll just have to grow something ourselves. But the lack of water certainly is an issue—the tenants’ time and energy are wasted on drawing water for irrigation.”

“Want me to go recruit tenants in town?” Li Zhifeng suggested.

You Miao laughed. “Best if we can find anyone at all, if not, that’s okay too. We’ll clear a piece of land for ourselves and provide for ourselves. Grow some vegetables, raise some chickens and a pig. As for rice, we’ll just buy it elsewhere.”

As he pulled aside the ivy covering the spirit screen, You Miao added, “Growing tea is the most profitable, but with my dad suppressing the price, I’d be seeking my own death trying to compete with him.”

Li Zhifeng went to help him, and the two cleaned the stone wall together.

“But it’s fine if we grow tea for fun,” You Miao continued. “I think if we section off a small bit of land on the hill over there and buy some tea saplings and keep an eye on them every so often, it’ll be fine.”

Li Zhifeng nodded with a grunt. “Makes sense.”

“Then we pick a couple of good fields around here, hire some temporary laborers to till the land for a few days, and throw some seeds down. We’ll be able to grow some vegetables for ourselves.”

“That’s doable,” Li Zhifeng agreed.

Li Zhifeng didn’t contribute any ideas; he knew You Miao was only saying all this to sort out his own thoughts, one step at a time. You Miao had to settle down first and clean up the manor before he could start to develop the estate.

After half the spirit screen was cleared, a column of words was revealed, the strokes of which were heavy-handed yet steady.

“There’s a poem here?” You Miao was surprised. “Wherein I once saw… Perhaps the previous owner of this place was a refined character. Let me see…”

As the ivy was cleared away, a verse from a poem appeared before them.

Wherein I once saw her beautiful figure reflected.

Li Zhifeng yanked off the rest of the vines covering the left side of the spirit screen, and the whole wall was revealed.

Heartbreaking be the evergreen waters under the bridge,

Wherein I once saw her beautiful figure reflected.[42]

You Miao was entranced as he stood before the spirit screen. He could now vaguely understand why his mother wanted to buy this estate.

Li Zhifeng noticed the dedication at the bottom corner: “To Tang Wan.” Someone had engraved that with a chisel.

“Let’s go take a look outside,” You Miao said.

The two exited the main entrance, and a plaque hung above the doors. While they looked, a swallow flew behind it. You Miao was delighted at the sight.

“That’s a good sign!”

“Take it down and wash it?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“No!” You Miao exclaimed. “Don’t alarm the swallow.”

It was an extremely auspicious sign to have swallow nests under the eaves. Although You Miao wasn’t particularly superstitious, he was still familiar with folklore. He was now filled with confidence for the future of Riverwave Estate, and if he had guessed right, then this place might be a historical relic as well.

Li Zhifeng ran up the wall with two steps and a leap, and landed on the guardian lion statue. He knocked lightly on the entrance plaque and a thick

layer of dust fell. You Miao went back inside to find a ladder, and after he brought one out, the two propped it up together. You Miao then found a rag and clambered up the rungs with Li Zhifeng steadying him from behind.

You Miao carefully wiped away the dust covering the plaque, and two large characters appeared: Shen Garden.[43]

"..." You Miao was speechless.

The gilded characters were dull and worn from age. You Miao shook his head and marveled with a sigh, "So that's what this place is…"

"What place?" Li Zhifeng asked as he carried You Miao down.

Once the two were back on the ground, they stood there contemplating the overhead plaque. The swallow from earlier peeked out from behind it to stare curiously at them.

"This was once the residence of a renowned Han poet…no wonder my mom bought it," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng made a sound of acknowledgment. "Can it be repaired?"

"Now that Shen Garden belongs to me, that's a matter of course," You Miao said with a smile.

They stood at the entrance of the manor for a while, simply gazing at the clear blue sky. Finally, You Miao said, "Ride to Anlu Village and buy some rice, flour, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar—and whatever other condiments. While you're there, swing by the market and see if there's anyone looking for work. Get a couple of contractors; we'll cover food and board."

You Miao went inside and returned with ten silver, along with the letters he had written to Zhao Chao and Li Yan.

"Spend sparingly," You Miao instructed. "And bring these letters to the post station to have them delivered to the capital. Be sure to come home early."

"I have more on me," Li Zhifeng said as he took out a small money pouch. Inside was the twenty silver that You Miao had given him back when he sent him away—he had held onto it all this time.

You Miao was beside himself with joy. “Nice! Go on, then.”

Li Zhifeng hopped onto the horse and rode off.

CHAPTER 11

Money couldn't be spent frivolously now. A tael of gold exchanged for thirty taels of silver, and a tael of silver exchanged for one string of one thousand copper coins. A string of coins could do many things: a pound of rice only cost eight coins, and a chicken only cost twenty-five. You Miao never used to manage household affairs and didn't know the cost of living, and now that he was adding everything all up, the one hundred silver his father gave him was, in fact, enough to feed him in Shen Garden for five to ten years.

But that little bit wasn't truly enough—he kept thinking of ways to make more from this capital. The first thing on the list was to properly renovate the manor. Of course, the house couldn't be so casually reconstructed—the moment You Miao saw the words "Shen Garden," he knew that every blade of grass and every tree, all the rockery and stone benches, had a history. Perhaps there might even be a number of antiques; thoughtlessly throwing those away would be a genuine waste.

You Miao strolled once around the courtyard. Shen Garden certainly was massive—his feet were already sore and yet there were only more enclosure walls in sight. He had to walk a full ten minutes before he reached the backyard. Once there, he brought out another horse from the stables and hopped on to rush toward the plains.

You Miao planned on getting a few hands to help with cleanup. The four tenant households were all located in different places, and as noon approached, he finally spotted a house in the distance with smoke rising out of its chimney.

"Whose house is this?" asked You Miao, stopping the horse outside.

"Shaoye!" Li Zhuang came hurrying out.

"Are you free right now?" You Miao asked.

Li Zhuang and his family were right in the middle of the slack season. Li Zhuang had just gotten home and had a drink of water, then he was probably going to discuss the future with his wife. When he heard You Miao had come to seek helping hands, he quickly said, “Yes, what does shaoye require?”

You Miao noticed there was another house right across from Li Zhuang’s. “Who’s living across the road?”

“That boy Zhang Er,” Li Zhuang answered with a chuckle.

“Zhang Er!” You Miao shouted.

A faint answer sounded from the courtyard across the road.

“If the two of you aren’t busy, come up to the estate. I’ve got something to say.”

You Miao left as soon as he said this, spurring the horse to return. After all, the horse carriage was still ditched in Shen Garden—which was where all the money was.

Shen Garden looked even more decrepit from the outside, yet the new home didn’t feel somber in the slightest when bathed in sunlight. Instead, it carried a sort of vitality—like that of life thriving amidst ruins, as though there was something growing underneath the shattered tiles and bricks, so lush that it was eager to break through the wreckage and stand dauntlessly tall.

You Miao tethered the horse by a tree outside the door to have it graze where weeds were growing in abundance. Then he stripped off the top half of his outer jacket and tied the sleeves around his waist, letting the robe hang loosely on his hips before he went to lug the stuff out of the horse-drawn carriage.

The most important thing at home was his money. There was only one hundred silver left; he had to keep it safe. You Miao carried the money box into the bedroom of the main building. When he entered the chamber, the screen crashed thunderously to the ground. The bedding had already deteriorated to bits of floccule.

You Miao looked around. Unexpectedly, there was a red chest by the foot of the wall, but it barely budged even when he pushed it with all his might. When he looked down, he discovered that this thing seemed to have been molded directly from the floor.

There was no lock, so You Miao opened the chest and poked his head in. Although it only housed some scrolls of calligraphy and paintings, the space inside went three feet deep into the ground. You Miao understood now—when the house was first constructed, half of this chest had been buried underground and secured with bricks.

This was perfect. The chest couldn't be removed, and he now had a safe in which to store valuables.

You Miao took the items from inside the chest with great difficulty. After tucking the money pouch You Hange had given him inside the money box in which he had put the one hundred silver, he placed that box inside the great copper chest. He retrieved a lock from the carriage and locked up the chest with a *ka-chak*.

There were two keys for the lock—one for himself and the other for Li Zhifeng. They would have to keep a guard dog in the future, You Miao thought. He should've told Li Zhifeng to buy a dog too.

"Shaoye—!"

Li Zhuang's yell came from outside. Both Li Zhuang and Zhang Er had arrived.

"Come in." You Miao dusted himself off and went outside. "There are some trunks in the carriage. Help me haul those in."

Zhang Er looked around and seemed a little surprised. "Shaoye, you're settling down?"

You Miao knew they all found it incredible, and as they should. As far as ordinary folks were concerned, a little young master raised in prestige and luxury like himself wouldn't last for more than a night before packing up and escaping back to Sunshower Tea Estate.

“Can’t be helped.” You Miao laughed as he led them to unload the stuff in the carriage. “My parents don’t love me, and a new gege joined the family. Naturally, I’ve no share in the family fortune.”

The other two exchanged a look with each other and took the trunk You Miao pulled out. You Miao didn’t mind discussing the subject, though.

“You’ve all heard about it, right?”

“Some,” Zhang Er answered.

Li Zhuang sent Zhang Er a look, and the two helped You Miao carry the trunk into the house.

“Gotta depend on yourself for everything,” You Miao said.

Li Zhuang chuckled. “The fella following shaoye looks like an honest man.”

“Yeah, thank goodness for him.”

You Miao re-entered the main house and pushed each window open. Sunlight poured in from both sides of the room, instantly brightening the main hall. The furniture mantled in heavy dust didn’t look gloomy or deteriorated anymore.

You Miao was astonished. “I can’t believe none of the furniture was stolen.”

Li Zhuang grinned. “Who’d come to steal from Shen Garden?”

“Is this the kind of place where people don’t lock their homes up at night and leave lost items wherever they’re found?” You Miao wondered. “Come. Let’s throw out all the rotten wood.”

You Miao had taken a great fancy to the bed in the master bedroom. A large bed alone was already worth a lot of money, and while the paint on the frame’s engravings had already chipped and faded, it would be restored to its former glory if they gave it a fresh coat. The canopy allowed for light to peek through, and once they replaced the tattered mosquito curtains and outfitted it with new bedding, it would become a little world of its own.

Li Zhuang tidied up the things and brought them outside to the yard. The furniture inside the house was built from birch and some other type of wood. You Miao knocked on each piece and confirmed that the furniture in the master bedroom was made of scented rosewood. Rosewood was highly valued for being heavy and enduring. The shelves and other pieces made from birch wood had all rotted through, and they were perfect firewood now that they were piled in the corner of the yard. The doors were made of rosewood, too. A good thing, as they'd be sturdy. The doors and windows wouldn't need to be changed—just hammer in new rivets, sand them down, and repaint them, and they would be good.

You Miao cleaned out the rooms and arranged the trunks. Li Zhuang was still washing the rooms, so You Miao took Zhang Er to the study.

The bookshelves and the desk in the study were also made of rosewood. The manor's furnishings were worth hundreds of silver at least; it was a miracle that no one had stolen anything in nearly a hundred years. Did the thieves not recognize the goods for what they were?

"How very strange," You Miao said to Zhang Er with a laugh. "Not a single visit from thieves in almost a century."

Zhang Er helped him open the trunks—ten massive ones, and all filled with books. Piles and piles of books.

"Are all of these yours?" Zhang Er asked, but he immediately realized the lack of address and quickly corrected himself. "Shaoye sure has a large collection of books."

You Miao made an affirming noise while he dusted off the bookshelves and sneezed a couple of times. "Some are my mom's, some are my little uncle's."

"All intellectuals," Zhang Er commented as he shelved the books, settling them in batches. "There are so many, be sure not to let the humidity get to them."

You Miao went to push the windows open. The study's back window faced the garden, and he could see the weed-covered rockery and an algae-choked pond amid the trees. If he hired a gardener to clean this up, it would

be a beautiful sight for sure. He then went to sit in the large chair behind the desk and pulled out each of the drawers. Surprisingly, there was a complete set of stationery: a mint-colored ceramic brush stand, a raven-black inkstone dotted with scarlet clouds, and even peony cinnabar ink paste—though the paste had dried. He wiped the table clean and placed each item on it.

"I'm more scared of robbery than anything else, to be honest," You Miao responded.

"No one will steal anything here," Zhang Er replied.

From the depths of the drawers, You Miao also found a jade bracelet that was broken in half, and he attempted to connect the pieces back together. "There's not even a watchman at Riverwave Estate, and no one's taking care of Shen Garden, so how come—"

"Because this place is haunted," Zhang Er said as he got up.

"..." You Miao was speechless.

"A woman died from illness here in Shen Garden," Zhang Er elaborated. You Miao's face turned sour as he added, "Then later, I heard the one who bought this garden also died…"

"That's my mom…" You Miao said.

Realizing he'd misspoken, Zhang Er quickly said, "Sorry, my bad."

"So the reason why there aren't many tenant farmers at Riverwave Estate is because you're all afraid of ghosts?" You Miao asked.

"No, it's not that," Zhang Er said. "A few daring folks came and took stuff home from Shen Garden, but they all died one after the other…"

The corners of You Miao's lips twitched nonstop. "You're kidding me."

Zhang Er dropped his voice and said in a whisper, "Uncle Liang had three sons. The eldest was the one who stole from the estate…but then both he and his wife died from illness, and Uncle Liang personally came to return the stuff."

You Miao felt a chill run down his spine, and the muscles of his face spasm. He didn't know if what Zhang Er told him was real or not, but he didn't ask for more details.

A fine scholar and lady, parted in bygone years,[44] and the lady had become a ghost. If there really were spirits in the world, You Miao would rather believe she had stayed all this time because of her longing for her lover.

Zhang Er went outside to draw water for washing, and You Miao mumbled to himself while he sorted the books.

"I didn't do anything to wrong her. There's no fear of ghosts at night if one does not commit sins in the day, he he."

"Shaoye is a fortunate soul," Zhang Er said upon his return. "You have lucky stars watching over you, so there's nothing to be afraid of."

Among the books You Miao flipped through, many were ones he had never touched before. Recalling that Zhang Er planned on going to the capital, he asked, "Are you thinking of going to the capital for the exams or to find work?"

"My parents both wanted me to become a scholar," Zhang Er said. "In a few years, I can go for Grace Exams[45] or attend the ones held every three years. The teacher at Anlu Village told me to try for the Prefectural Exam first."

You Miao nodded. "Well, don't rush off so quickly, then. Feel free to come study here in Shen Garden any time."

Surprise colored Zhang Er's eyes, and You Miao added, "I don't think you can go to the capital any time soon, anyway. When you do go, though, remember to give me a shout. I'll write you a letter to take with you. I have a lot of friends at the capital, so it'll be good if there are people who can look after you, too, right?"

Zhang Er knew this meant You Miao was willing to lend him a hand, and he quickly prostrated. "Thank you very much, shaoye!"

You Miao rushed to pull him up, gesturing to say he was welcome. Zhang Er then returned to cleaning the study, and You Miao went back to sorting the books, finally coming to the last chest.

Inscribed on the inside cover of the small chest was a verse in delicately beautiful handwriting: *A house of gold within a book does hold; a comely bride within a book does reside.*[46]

You Miao started to laugh as he remembered how his mother had held her brush and taught him to read in the past. Qiao Ke-er preferred the "make love, not war" ideals of Mohism, which was a vast departure from the common idolization of Confucianism in the Jiangnan region—and perhaps the entire government. Mohism had an intimate knowledge of the art of war, engineering, and agriculture, and employing the Mohist art of rhetoric was often effective in shutting You Dechuan up, rendering him unable to retort.

You Dechuan, on the other hand, solidly believed that studying the classics and following the teachings of Confucius and Mencius was the right path, so he heavily scorned Qiao Ke-er's penchant for Mohism. Later, he would often lecture You Miao, telling him that his mom was shrewdly clever and had raised him an equally shrewdly clever little bastard.

Rummaging through the open chest, You Miao wanted to see if he could find any useful resources from his mother's collection. He abruptly came upon "*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People,"*[47] and his eyes instantly lit up. And then there were "*Exploitations of the Works of Nature,*[48]" "*The Dream Pool Essays,*[49]" "*Divine Farmer Shennong,*[50]" "*Elder of the Wild*[51]" ... There was even a copy of "*Mohist Classics"*!

This was practically like winning the lottery. The chest of books that You Miao's mother had left him was a precious gem that would teach him how to manage the estate! Immediately abandoning the cleaning, You Miao went to the veranda with the books in his arms and plopped down, immersing himself in them completely.

The first one he started with was the "*Exploitations of the Works of Nature*." It documented how to build waterwheels, how to paint, how to refine salt and sugar, how to build canals, how to fabricate the five metals,

among other things. Even all the required measurements and volumes were clearly recorded.

You Miao carefully studied the waterwheel. After a while, he got up to flip through "*Mohist Classics*" in order to compare the engineering specs, then retrieved a charcoal stick and sat simply on the floor as he started to draw and take notes.

The sun gradually sank in the west. From the main courtyard, Li Zhuang called, "Shaoye, the main house and the master bedroom are all cleaned. Do you require anything else?"

Zhang Er had also finished wiping down the study and was standing in front of the shelves reading You Miao's books.

You Miao made a sound of acknowledgment without looking up. "Grab me the money pouch on top of the drawer?"

Li Zhuang hastily declined, saying he couldn't take the young master's money, to which You Miao replied, "It's fine, go grab it. I've got other errands to ask of you."

There were less than ten days before New Year's and the farmers were in the middle of their slack season. Rather than sit around at home, they might as well come and help do work for You Miao. You Miao took out a string of coins and handed twenty to Zhang Er.

"Here, take this," You Miao said.

"I can't take shaoye's money," Zhang Er said. "I'm already immensely grateful that he permits me to come read books."

You Miao reconsidered; Zhang Er's determination had the integrity of a scholar, so he didn't force him. He turned around and gave the twenty coins to Li Zhuang instead.

"Twenty coins for today's labor," You Miao said. "Here's another full string; go into town for me tomorrow and buy all the sundries I've listed here. Keep count of everything you spend, I'll be asking."

You Miao handed Li Zhuang a slip of brown packing paper with words written in charcoal. "For lumber, I just need you to ask for the price. Li

Zhifeng isn't familiar with the town, so I don't want him tricked."

Li Zhuang hastily replied "yessir, yessir," and You Miao concluded the night with, "Go home for dinner, then, both of you."

"I'll have my wife come later and cook for shaoye," Li Zhuang said.

"It's fine, don't worry about it. Li Zhifeng should be back soon, and we'll just eat whatever's here," You Miao replied. "I'll hire a granny cook in a few days."

You Miao sent Li Zhuang and Zhang Er home, and returned to sitting on the veranda buried in the books. He knew Li Zhuang had that complete change of attitude since this morning because he was rich. Money makes the world go 'round; temp labor elsewhere was merely ten coins a day. But work for Young Master You? Twenty coins, easy.

As the sun sank below the western horizon, there came the commotion of a horse-drawn carriage outside. You Miao raised his head and was about to shout Li Zhifeng's name when he stopped himself, feeling awkward. It suddenly occurred to him that he still hadn't given the Quanrong slave he had purchased a new name, and that Li Zhifeng still retained Li Yan's surname. Usually, if You Miao was to call him, it was either "hey," or "oy" like one would a dog, and yet Li Zhifeng would come over.

"You're back?" You Miao called out.

"I'm back."

Li Zhifeng's answer was absent-minded amidst the horses' whinnying. You Miao didn't budge from where he was, however, and continued to flip through his books, feeling a bit hungry. Li Zhifeng came over a moment later, and his massive form blocked the sunlight.

"Go away, you're blocking the light," You Miao admonished.

Li Zhifeng didn't move and stayed with one knee bent to the ground at You Miao's side. Something struck You Miao, and he looked up to see Li Zhifeng smiling. It was a warm and handsome smile, but this wasn't what caught You Miao's attention. What surprised him immensely was the tiny little puppy in Li Zhifeng's arms.

You Miao instantly tossed his books away. “Where’d you get it?”

Li Zhifeng gave a small smile and raised the puppy’s paws, crisscrossing them and making pawing gestures with them to playfully tease You Miao.

The dog was a mixed breed, and had large black spots splashed all over its white body. It stared at You Miao with its keen black eyes, one of which sported a spot. It looked silly and stupid and awfully adorable.

“Let me hold it!” You Miao took the puppy and started to play with it in his arms. “How much was it?”

“Nothing,” Li Zhifeng replied. “The bitch in front of the rice shop gave birth to a litter, so I asked the boss for one.”

As the puppy was yapping, You Miao was incredibly pleased. “I was just thinking of getting a guard dog, and you bring one home.”

The corners of Li Zhifeng’s lips lifted. He answered with a “mn” and petted the puppy’s head, then petted You Miao’s head.

Caught between laughter and tears, You Miao rose to his feet and followed Li Zhifeng to the backyard. “So you bought everything?”

“Yes,” Li Zhifeng replied. “Spent a total of three silver and rented a cart.”

There were two horses in Shen Garden, so one could pull the cart. It was perfect. You Miao went to check it out and saw Li Zhifeng had filled the cart full of his purchases. There was cured meat, winter bamboo shoots, several large jugs of pickles, vegetables, the staple rice and noodles, and condiments—oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar. There were also several live chickens cooing from a cage and a few wild rabbits hanging at the front of the cart.

Li Zhifeng unloaded everything and carried them into the kitchen.

“Did you mail the letters?” You Miao asked.

“Mn.”

“Hire the contractors?”

“Mn.”

“When are they coming?”

“Tomorrow.”

The exchange between You Miao and Li Zhifeng was succinct and dull. After Li Zhifeng put the food away, he swept the floor while You Miao went to open the covers of the stovetop. The pots and spatulas were all rusted. Li Zhifeng put the condiments in place one by one, but they were both a little at a loss in the face of a kitchen like this.

“Do you…know how to cook?” You Miao asked.

“A little bit,” Li Zhifeng replied.

Li Zhifeng went out. When he returned to the kitchen, he was holding a new pot and pan and put them over the stove’s holes. The left side was the frying pan, while the right was a stewing pot. Then he retrieved a large iron basin and set it over the charcoal burner next to the stove before stacking steamer baskets on top. So it was a steamer pot.

You Miao looked at the now complete setup. “...”

Li Zhifeng looked at the now complete setup, too. “...”

“So you *do* know how to cook. That’s great,” You Miao said.

“I’ve done it in the past,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“What did you used to make?” You Miao asked.

“Barbeque.”

“...I think rice is meant to be steamed.” You Miao looked around the kitchen curiously, and when he saw Li Zhifeng had scooped a large wooden cup of rice, he reminded him, “I think you have to add water. You can’t just set the grain in the steamer directly.”

Li Zhifeng stopped for a second, then nodded. “Right.”

You Miao deflated and lost all feelings of annoyance.

“Go read,” Li Zhifeng said. “Don’t worry about this.”

The corners of You Miao’s lips twitched, and he said as he exited, “Li Zhuang cleaned out the well today. I’ll go draw water.”

“Let me.”

Li Zhifeng took the bucket from You Miao willfully, so You Miao could only pull over a chair and watch while sitting in the kitchen yard. The puppy was running back and forth, following after Li Zhifeng, panting and wagging its tail.

Li Zhifeng glanced at it and said, “Go sit.”

“C’mere, Xiao-Hei,” You Miao beckoned.

The spotted dog ran over and lay quietly at You Miao’s feet. Li Zhifeng carried the water inside and washed the vat before he single-handedly carried it out. A giant basin weighing sixty pounds was like a mere water bucket in his hands. He swirled the vat and dumped the water, then he laid it flat and wiped it dry with a rag.

The strength of this guy… You Miao couldn’t help but think that Li Zhifeng could crush him like a baby chick if they were to ever fight. You Miao still remembered what Li Yan had told him, that Li Zhifeng was fed some sort of medicine that stripped him of all of his martial ability.

“Have your martial skills recovered?” You Miao asked.

Li Zhifeng carried the water vat into the kitchen and answered from the inside, “No. Only about a fifth.”

You Miao was taken aback. This was only a fifth of his strength?!

“How do you recover completely?” You Miao couldn’t help but ask.

“It’ll return to me eventually as long as I don’t take the medicine,” Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao recalled the day Li Zhifeng had, by his lonesome, rescued him and Zhao Chao from the Tartar village, and how his one arrow had pierced two men. That bow’s tension had to have been at least hundreds of pounds. Terrifying.

Just as he was about to ask more questions, a large amount of smoke came pouring out of the kitchen as though something had caught on fire. Li Zhifeng was coughing nonstop.

“Is something on fire?” You Miao hastily asked.

Li Zhifeng choked out in between coughs, “...Don’t…come in…”

As soon as You Miao stepped foot into the kitchen, the smoke choked him to tears. Li Zhifeng coughed for a bit, then the two escaped from the kitchen ashen-faced.

“The chimney…the chi…” You Miao coughed as he pointed up.

Hooking one hand onto the eaves, Li Zhifeng flipped upward in one light movement and landed on the roof. Soon after, there was the cawing of crows from the chimney as several crows fled. The chimney was blocked by a bird nest and weeds. With a single slap, Li Zhifeng knocked all of that down—including some bricks. There was a loud rumble.

“Okay, okay!” You Miao immediately cried. “Don’t destroy the kitchen too!”

Once the smoke dispersed, the fire finally started in the stove. You Miao blew the flames with a blower and accidentally sucked in a breath of the smoke, so he coughed heavily for another moment.

Li Zhifeng burst out laughing, unable to resist, and said, “Here. Let me.”

With a smile still hanging on his face, Li Zhifeng stoked the fire for a moment before he began to cut the vegetables.

“Cut them into slices,” You Miao ordered from beside him.

“Understood,” Li Zhifeng answered without looking up.

The light outside dimmed, and the temperature began to drop. Seeing as how there was nothing he could do to help, You Miao decided to go for a stroll around Shen Garden.

As he left, Li Zhifeng called out, “Go put on another layer.”

What a nag, You Miao thought. He came to the abrupt realization that Li Zhifeng didn’t seem to call him by name a lot, either. In the beginning, he would still say “shaoye,” but now that address seemed to have been dismissed, too. Li Zhifeng had become much more proactive ever since

they left Sunshower Tea Estate. It was as if he was taking care of You Miao as his own little brother.

You Miao was never a stickler for etiquette like Li Yan and the others. In fact, You Miao probably wouldn't think it'd matter if Li Zhifeng called him 'boy' like older folks did—it would actually feel more intimate that way.

Gazing out from a high point of the front yard, You Miao could see rings of smoke puffing out of the chimneys from the houses in the distance. The sky was dark, and the bamboo of Shen Garden rustled along with the soughs and sighs of winter winds, creating its own distinct atmosphere.

It was a pretty heartbreaking business, being reduced to a sole servant to survive. Yet what made it special was that this servant was Li Zhifeng. He was nothing like a typical servant; if it was anyone else in his place, like Shiqi-er or Muqi-er… You Miao was certain he'd be whining and moaning about it and feeling irritated at the mere sight of them.

It was different with Li Zhifeng, though. Even You Miao himself found it amusing. Living with Li Zhifeng was like playing house no matter how he looked at it, and it was indescribably fun.

Maybe Li Zhifeng had also lived the life of a young master once, when he was beyond the border. The way he spoke and the way he carried himself made You Miao certain that the man was no one ordinary.

A short while later, each lamp in the main hall, the bedroom, and the study was lit. Even though there were only the two of them in this massive manor, it felt warm. Xiao-Hei stuck by You Miao's feet, not straying more than an inch away, and followed You Miao wherever he went.

You Miao was starving by now. He had only had a bit of noodles for lunch and nothing else the rest of the day. When he returned to the kitchen yard, however, he could smell something burning.

"..." You Miao didn't comment.

"..." Li Zhifeng remained silent, too.

At the very least, the rice on the table was cooked. It was fine rice, too; each grain was sparkling and translucent and emitted a sweet aroma. The

pot of straw mushroom soup looked as it should as well, with a sprinkle of green onions on top. Unfortunately, the stir-fried meat was so burnt it was like it'd been reduced to ashes, and the plate of vegetables was stir-fried to the point where barely anything was left—what remained of the leaves lay sadly in the middle of said plate.

You Miao burst out laughing. "Ha ha ha ha ha—!"

Li Zhifeng could say nothing in his defense, and You Miao was laughing so hard his eyes brimmed with tears. Nonetheless, he didn't complain.

"Let's sit," You Miao said.

"I wasn't able to control the fire well," Li Zhifeng explained.

"It's fine, it's fine," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng arranged the chair and was ready to wait on You Miao as he'd always done, but You Miao tugged at him.

"Join me. Don't worry about those rules."

"No. You're the master," Li Zhifeng said.

"Oh, shut up," You Miao said. "There's only the two of us in Shen Garden. Come, eat. It'll be dull if no one eats with me. It'll kill my appetite."

Only then did Li Zhifeng take a seat and busy himself with wiping You Miao's bowl clean.

"Feed something to Xiao-Hei, too," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng stood up and mixed some rice with a bit of the mushroom soup. Stuffing its face in the proffered bowl, Xiao-Hei ate happily and soundly. You Miao watched it with a smile, not moving his chopsticks.

"Eat." Li Zhifeng served You Miao rice. "Give me a few days to take up cooking. I'll learn eventually."

You Miao grinned and tried a bite. "It's a bit salty."

Li Zhifeng acknowledged with a "mn," but then when he took a bite himself, his face scrunched up into an awful grimace.

“I’ll go knock on Li Zhuang’s door and ask them to scramble a couple of eggs for us,” Li Zhifeng said as he got to his feet.

“Forget it, forget it,” You Miao said. “Don’t go bothering other people. Just eat. Salty dishes go well with rice, anyway.”

You Miao had starved for an entire day, so he couldn’t care less about being picky. If this had been at the capital or at home and the cook whipped up something like this, You Miao would’ve called them over and thrown the dishes in their face. But since it was Li Zhifeng who had cooked, You Miao was filled with boundless affection. Besides, You Miao also knew that Li Zhifeng had probably never cooked anything aside from roasting meat while beyond the border.

“The soup is bland,” You Miao commented. “Next time you cook, try tasting the dish while you add salt and soy sauce, and stop when you think it’s good.”

Li Zhifeng had acknowledged with another “mn” at first, but then looked as if he had something to say. Before he could, however, You Miao added, “There aren’t all that many crappy rules and bits of etiquette. Did you forget what we’ve already done together? We’ve swapped saliva already, so who cares about some dishes?”

Li Zhifeng laughed, unable to stop himself, and shook his head as he did so. Then he grinned and nodded.

You Miao was gradually thinking that Li Zhifeng was starting to act more like a person. When they first met, he was like a piece of unfeeling wood. Now there was finally some display of emotion, and he would even take the initiative to speak to him. You Miao figured that it was because life was going smoothly, and that had put him in good spirits.

“I want to build a waterwheel,” You Miao declared.

“Sure,” Li Zhifeng said. “I’ll go build one tomorrow.”

“There’s no rush,” You Miao said. “I sent Li Zhuang to ask for a cost estimate. There are some trees on the hills out back, I wonder if they can be used.”

Li Zhifeng nodded, and You Miao continued, “We should section off a plot of land nearby and cultivate it so we can plant something there. Starting tomorrow, you’ll manage outside affairs, and I’ll manage the household.”

Li Zhifeng answered with a “mn.”

After dinner, Li Zhifeng washed and put away the dishes, then heated bathwater for You Miao. You Miao was absolutely exhausted from busying about the whole day, but as he lay on the bed after his bath, he felt accomplished on top of being tired.

The master bedroom was more or less cleaned up, but Shen Garden was so damn big that it’d take at least half a month to tidy up its four wings and eighteen rooms. You Miao didn’t actually do much, but he couldn’t stop feeling tired—after all, this was a far cry from when all he did was eat and fool around. But his appetite was better now. He had eaten two whole bowls of rice and some pickled radish.

Li Zhifeng didn’t stop bustling about until it was nearly midnight. You Miao was already drifting off, but the splashing sound of water from the yard jolted him into bolting upright. From his bed, he could faintly see Li Zhifeng stripped bare naked outside in the freezing cold of winter. Standing under the moonlight and looking like a fine stallion as he did, he poured a bucket of ice-cold water over himself.

“Hey!” You Miao frantically called out. “Don’t freeze yourself.”

“I won’t,” Li Zhifeng replied nonchalantly. “Go to sleep.”

“Why don’t you come sleep in my room?” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng answered with a “mn.” Now that You Miao had woken up once, he found it a little hard to go back to sleep. He tossed and turned until he heard Li Zhifeng enter the room, close the door behind him, and spread out his bedding on the floor.

You Miao stuck his head out. The blanket Li Zhifeng had spread out beside the bed on the floor was the same one You Miao had given him months ago back in the capital.

The wind outside picked up, moaning like the cries of a female ghost. What Zhang Er had said during the day came back to You Miao—specifically, that the house was haunted—and all of You Miao's hair immediately stood on end.

"Come up here and sleep with me," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng didn't move. His breathing was even as he lay there, clearly worn out from the day.

You Miao tried again, "Li Zhifeng?"

This time, Li Zhifeng stirred, and You Miao asked, "Are you asleep? Come up to bed and sleep with me."

Thus, Li Zhifeng climbed into bed and lay down. His skin was warm despite the cold bath from earlier. You Miao tugged his arm, and Li Zhifeng extended the powerful limb for him to lie on, drawing him close and holding him snug.

You Miao had been a little scared at first, but now that he was cuddling with Li Zhifeng, his mind strayed to something else altogether. Breathing coming short and quick now, he rubbed his thighs against Li Zhifeng's and reached for his crotch.

Li Zhifeng's breathing hitched, and that soft thing between his legs hardened in You Miao's hands after a few caresses.

You Miao looked up to find Li Zhifeng gazing at him as well.

"Do you want it?" Li Zhifeng asked in a low voice.

You Miao answered with a "mn," so Li Zhifeng untied his waistband and pulled You Miao close, moving to lie on top of him. He wrapped one hand around You Miao's waist and reached into his underclothes with the other, stroking and groping as he leaned down to capture You Miao's lips with his own.

"Mm…"

You Miao closed his eyes, feeling only hot and good. Doing it with Li Zhifeng this time was a little different from the last time; there seemed to be something more between the two of them now.

Li Zhifeng stripped You Miao out of his clothes and one-handedly rummaged through a bag at the head of the bed for mutton tallow. He applied some to himself, then slowly pushed in. You Miao gasped out a soft "*ah*" at first, feeling pain as that cock opened him up, but as Li Zhifeng fucked into him, he really didn't want him to let go. They held onto one another, the blanket shifting in time with their rhythmic movements.

You Miao murmured helplessly, "Come in a little more, more…"

So Li Zhifeng drove in deep, and You Miao's abdomen tensed up with how good it felt as he brushed against that spot inside of him. He clutched at Li Zhifeng and bit down on his shoulder, but his head was forcibly turned as Li Zhifeng's tongue pushed past his lips to rub heatedly against his own, kissing the breath right out of him.

You Miao didn't know how long it had been, but just when he couldn't hold on for much longer, Li Zhifeng collapsed on top of him panting like a wild beast. He caressed his cheek and pressed little kisses to his ear, then pulled out of him. You Miao was still somewhat keen as he clung to Li Zhifeng, the two of them lying there quietly like that.

Li Zhifeng pulled him against his chest and murmured, "I was too fast today."

You Miao laughed and said, "They say this place is haunted."

"I'll hold you, so don't be scared," Li Zhifeng said.

"M'kay."

You Miao rubbed his cheek against Li Zhifeng's chest, feeling sleep creep up on him, then dozed off.

CHAPTER 12

When he opened his eyes the next day, the brisk, gusty winds had stopped and the sky was clear and blue once more. You Miao stretched and rose amidst the chirping of birds, feeling rested and refreshed. He rolled off the bed and dressed himself, all the while hearing Li Zhifeng's voice outside talking to someone.

After washing up, You Miao went down the corridors and saw two contractors standing outside the main hall. Both were around twenty years old, give or take. When Li Zhifeng saw You Miao had come, he went to get breakfast.

The morning fare was still only a bowl of noodles, but it was paired with three eggs this time. You Miao slurped the noodles down while the two laborers surveyed the place.

"Shaoye, this sure is an old house, huh," one said with a laugh. "Not even my great aunt is this old. It's gonna be a lotta work to fix it all up."

"I don't have the money to fix it all up." You Miao wiped his mouth and set the empty bowl aside. "Seventy percent will do."

"That'd be too much for just the two of us," said the older craftsman, who had also been the first to speak. "Shaoye, you might have to hire another person. Besides, there isn't enough lumber. Look at this window and this door, they're barely holding together…"

You Miao frequently dealt with merchants, so he knew what these guys were getting at. It came down to more money, of course.

"As if I'd let you change the door even if you wanted to," he said tartly. "This is stuff from the Tang Dynasty; look at the craftsmanship of the carvings, look at the wood, it's rosewood. Don't try to pull a fast one on me, this is the same material my house is built from."

You Miao tapped on the frame and continued, “The wood’s perfectly fine, it’s the rivets that are broken and rusted. All it needs is a few new ones. Or what, are you gonna rip my door out and use it as firewood? The beams and columns don’t need fixing either. Just be careful not to damage the door; you can’t afford to pay for it if you break it.”

The craftsman grinned unabashedly. “No can do, shaoye, really. We can’t do this job.”

“Didn’t think you could, either. Head on back, then. I’ll go find someone from Guozhuang Village instead,” You Miao said, seemingly casual. “What do you think they’ll say when I tell them that I want to fix up Shen Garden, but you lot from Anlu were too chicken to take the job?”

You Miao knew that Li Zhifeng had found the two men in Anlu Village. Anlu Village was located in the south, Guozhuang Village was in the north, and Riverwave Estate was stuck right in the middle of both. There was bad blood between Anlu and Guozhuang, and they were constantly at each other’s throats year after year.

With that provocation, the craftsmen certainly couldn’t leave now. One said, “Well, that’s not very fair, shaoye. We didn’t know the job would be fixing up this huge place with just the two of us. The pounding and hammering aside, we don’t even have the manpower to move stuff around. Even if it’s a simple planing, the door alone’s at least four, fifty pounds…”

“A couple of big buff guys like you can’t even lift a door?” You Miao said. “Li Zhifeng!”

Li Zhifeng answered the call, and You Miao said, “This butler of mine is tall and skinny and hardly gets enough to eat every day… Li Zhifeng, go fetch me that water vat outside.”

Li Zhifeng walked to the middle of the garden, bent down, and hooked his fingers into the holes in a stone block sitting there. The three inside the hall were silent as they watched him. The water vat was only about several dozen pounds but the stone block was nearly a hundred. Li Zhifeng lifted it using only one hand and carried it to the hall, setting it down on the ground outside with a dull thud.

“All right. You can put it back now,” You Miao said.

And so, Li Zhifeng picked the stone block back up using two fingers, carried it back to where it was found, and dropped it on the ground with a thump, sending clouds of dust flying.

The craftsmen were dumbstruck.

“Wh-wh-what…” the older craftsman stammered. “Shaoye, seriously, it’s not just about how heavy things are. This job really is hard.”

“If you can’t take it, then forget it. Shoo, shoo, stop wasting your breath,” You Miao said. “Look at your puny builds, you don’t even look like you work in the great founding father’s trade…[52]”

“Says who?!” The younger craftsman appeared extremely offended as he rambled, “You’re the stingy one who won’t pay up! Making two people do the work of ten men, you tell me—you tell me if that’s fair!”

The older craftsman quickly shot him a look to stop him.

“What’s wrong with doing ten men’s work and getting ten men’s pay? It’s not like I’d short you there,” You Miao taunted.

The older craftsman seemed to be considering the idea, and You Miao added, “And if you need something lifted or moved, just have my butler help. Anyway, don’t answer me just yet. Come with me and take a look first.”

You Miao led the two craftsmen through the estate. “For these rooms, fix up the windows, the doors, and the wood paneling inside. Ask me before you tear down or toss anything. Do not, under any circumstances, rip out anything without my permission.”

For a quarter of an hour, they walked from the main hall to the east wing, then the west wing, the guest house, the second entrance and the main entrance. After the entire place was checked out, You Miao finished with, “One string of coins in total for the whole job, that’s my offer for the renovation. Don’t bother haggling with me, I know the market price everywhere else is only ten coins a day tops. This is ten days’ worth.”

The younger craftsman hurriedly tugged his partner's shirt. You Miao was well aware that hiring the two men for ten days at market value would be only two hundred coins. His offer was indeed ten men's worth—there was no way they would refuse it.

The older craftsman asked, "Boss, you gonna cover meals?"

You Miao knew this was a done deal the moment he was called "boss." In a chipper mood, he replied, "Of course. You'll eat whatever I eat."

"We're big eaters," the younger craftsman warned.

"One catty of rice per person a day and two shots of liquor each, no more," You Miao said.

"All right." The older craftsman nodded. "I still gotta think it over, plan how to make this job work. Shaoye knows his stuff; we'll have to have everything done in ten days."

"There's no rush. Inspect the spots that we went over and run your plans by me first, and it'll be fine. If you really can't finish in ten days, then just keep working, I don't mind."

The older craftsman laughed. "Yeah, but we still gotta go home for New Year's. What're we gonna do if we don't finish in time?"

You Miao chuckled as well. He didn't actually care about this bit of spare change. After all, he used to spend money by the tael back in the capital; one string of coins wasn't even enough for a pot of tea at the fancier teahouses. It was simply that the fewer laborers there were, the better. It'd be easier to keep an eye on them that way, so that no one got any funny ideas or sticky fingers. There also wouldn't be any infighting, *and* they wouldn't feel inclined to slack off thinking the other would do the job.

Li Zhifeng was crouching on the veranda eating breakfast and You Miao sipped his tea leisurely while the two craftsmen figured things out between themselves. Paying them no mind, You Miao grabbed his pre-packed bag and left Shen Garden with Li Zhifeng in tow to section off land.

He didn't really pay attention before, but now that he was walking around, it was dawning on You Miao just how big Riverwave Estate was—

and it was scaring him. Large swaths of vacant land stretched as far as the eye could see.

What a waste, what a waste. If only there were people to farm it, You Miao thought.

Of the two hundred acres of land, only half an acre was being farmed—barely enough to make a pittance, and he still had to pay two hundred acres' worth of taxes annually. Although the tax was paid out of Sunshower Tea Estate's coffers and his father probably didn't care for this measly amount, since he had taken over the place, starting next year he might have to wrack his brain to figure out how to squeeze out a couple hundred silver for those bloodsuckers in the government.

You Miao's feet ached from all the walking, so Li Zhifeng carried him on his back. They walked past a canal that had long since dried up, a winding waterway that originated from Anlu in the south and ran curiously northward.

"The water here's all dried up?" You Miao wondered.

"I asked about it," Li Zhifeng answered. "This canal used to draw water from Anlu Village, but it doesn't flow anymore."

You Miao climbed off of Li Zhifeng's back and bent down to grab a handful of soil, inspecting the color of it between his fingers. "Give me some water."

Li Zhifeng poured water from the waterskin into the wooden cup he had packed. After You Miao mixed some of the soil in the water, he found that its quality was actually decent.

He flipped open "*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*" and skimmed through the section on agriculture. "This land isn't suited to grow tea, the soil's a bit too sticky."

Li Zhifeng had no clue what he was talking about, so he simply stood there and listened.

"Let's go check that hill over there," You Miao said.

They arrived at the Yangtze. Its waters surged and roiled in a powerful torrent, and not a single ferryboat was in sight by the bank. The shores on either side were dozens of yards above the water line, and a thick rope hung between them to serve as a way to cross.

You Miao couldn't help muttering, "Fucking hell, that's way too dangerous. Who the hell *does* that?"

"I'll carry you across, don't look down," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao clung to Li Zhifeng's back, and Li Zhifeng repeated, "Don't be scared, and don't look down."

And then he used his belt to tie the two of them together and started climbing across, just like that. When they were halfway, You Miao couldn't resist looking down and immediately felt dizzy.

The soil north of the river was different from that of the south; it was nothing but fertile land, perfect for planting trees.

You Miao walked to the edge of his domain where a boundary stone marked the border of Riverwave Estate. Past here, the road heading to Guozhuang Village was all but buried under weeds. However, just across the boundary was someone else's farm plot that was encroaching into the estate's territory.

Said someone was currently burning hay, and he hollered when he noticed You Miao and Li Zhifeng, "What're you doing here? Where'd you come from?"

You Miao thought to himself, *You tired of living or something, planting your land on my turf*? But then again, there hadn't been anyone managing this estate for a hundred years, so he had to let it go for now and deal with the man later. Judging by the looks of the guy, it was easy to guess he was from Guozhuang Village. Guozhuang Village and Anlu Village had straight up gathered people to duke it out on the downlow before, and had even killed a couple people in the process. They literally could not stand the sight of one another.

You Miao waved. "I'm from Riverwave Estate!"

The farmer straightened up and said, “Riverwave Estate? Someone’s finally taking charge of that haunted place?”

Li Zhifeng’s face darkened, but You Miao gestured not to mind it and said with a laugh, “My name is You Miao, You Dechuan’s son. I’m planning to tidy this place up and live here. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d appreciate it if da-ge can let your fellow village folks know I’m gonna be the new neighbor.”

The farmer looked You Miao up and down. “So you’re You-shaoye? No wonder…”

A thought struck You Miao, and he asked Li Zhifeng, “How far is Guozhuang Village from here?”

The farmer answered instead, “Right over there, five miles straight ahead.”

You Miao nodded and whispered to Li Zhifeng, “Go back and bring me some tea from the second drawer of the desk inside the study. Measure out half a catty from the box inside.”

Li Zhifeng headed back while You Miao grinned, sat down on a big rock, and—paying no mind to the fact that the farmer’s plot infringed on his land—struck up a casual conversation with him, asking what crops he usually planted. The farmer seemed somewhat incredulous, and only treated him as a pampered little young master. He wasn’t wrong, though—You Miao *was* a young master who had hardly ever lifted a finger in all his life, nor could he even tell turnips from corn. But since he was here now, who he used to be didn’t matter much anymore.

You Miao was clever by nature and knew exactly what to say and who to say it to. Li Zhifeng returned before long, and the two of them followed the farmer back to Guozhuang Village.

This place was already within the borders of Liu Prefecture. Liu and Yang prefectures were divided by the Yangtze River, which marked their boundary—they had crossed that river using the ropeway earlier. People of Liu Prefecture had an unyielding temper and were loud and fierce in arguments, while people of Yang Prefecture were coolly scathing. There

was only a single river between them, yet their cultures were vastly different.

You Miao met with Guozhuang Village's old village chief and gifted him a small case of tea. The village chief was surprised.

"How can your dad bear to toss you out here?" the village chief asked.

You Miao replied with a smile, "No, I chose to come here. There's no point in sticking around Sunshower Tea Estate."

The old chief was already over sixty and easily grasped what he was saying. He said with a chuckle, "I met your mom once, back in the day."

"Really?" You Miao was surprised.

The old chief continued with a smile, "You're clever, just like her." Then he turned toward the few people sitting in the hall and said, "Young Master You is here to manage the estate now, so we'll be neighbors from here on out. Be sure to visit often."

"But of course," You Miao said with a smile. "How much is Guozhuang Village's field lease?"

The old chief sighed. "Forty percent, both last year and this year. This county hasn't sent a community captain[53] yet, so who knows what it'll be next year."

"Oh."

You Miao nodded thoughtfully. Forty percent. In other words, four-tenths of the harvest had to be handed over as rent every year, and the tenant farmers got the remaining six-tenths.

With a smile, You Miao said, "The field lease on my dad's estate is seventy percent."

"That's different," the village chief said. "A tea plantation can make do however much it gets taxed. But the land here can't grow tea; no one would want it even if we did grow it. Aye, it's tough around here."

Struck by a sudden idea, You Miao said, "Actually, I was thinking about putting down some tea trees in the estate, but I don't have anyone to do the

work and didn't have any luck recruiting tenant farmers, either. If it's all right, would you mind keeping an eye out for me, and if anyone comes looking for permanent work, send them my way?"

The chief was noncommittal and didn't respond, so You Miao smiled and added, "Sunshower Tea Estate is gonna give me twenty thousand tea saplings per year, the best of the best Beauty Brow variety. Once the leaves are sun-dried into Spingsun Guapian,[54] it's sure to sell. The Empress Dowager was rather fond of it a couple years back, but it hasn't been sent to the imperial court as tribute in recent years. They're now only sold to the three areas of Banan, Shuzhong, and Hanzhong. My dad couldn't be bothered to grow it either, and the saplings are just collecting dust at the estate…"

"You-shaoye wants to grow tea up on the hills?" the village chief asked.

"That's the plan." You Miao grinned. "But I don't really have people, and tea trees take a couple years to grow anyway, so I'm not in any rush."

"Yeah, we're all just making do, year after year. There isn't enough grain left over to eat either, so we can't afford to wait the years it takes for the tea trees to grow. Besides, tea trees are hard to care for…"

You Miao laughed. "My parents have grown tea their whole lives. Surely you don't think I'll screw it up, chief?"

"You're Lady Qiao's son, of course you're more than capable," the village chief replied. "I'm just worried that the tenant farmers wouldn't be interested in joining you, since it'll take at least two years for the tea trees to grow; their families still gotta eat in the meantime—and that's not something you can wait on!"

You Miao made a noise of affirmation and nodded. "I was looking to hire some permanent workers, but had no luck since everyone's gone home to celebrate New Year's. Chief, you got hands here in your village. I'll hire the ones idling in their slack seasons to help me open up some land. I'll make it worth their time; ten coins for every one thousand square feet."

"Alrighty," the village chief said. "Sure, I'll keep an eye out for you and send people your way if anyone wants to earn some extra money."

You Miao was satisfied with that; he knew that toward the end of the year, there were always people looking to make some extra money to pay back debts or buy new clothes for their wives. With old chief Guo helping, there'd be people knocking on his doors in three days tops, guaranteed. With that settled, You Miao rose to his feet and bade his farewells.

"Shall we go to the market?" Li Zhifeng asked as they headed out.

You Miao, feeling lazy, said, "I don't wanna walk anymore."

Li Zhifeng grinned. "I'll princess-carry you."

You Miao laughed and pushed against him. "Get out first, don't act embarrassing in here. Is the market far?"

"Not too far," Li Zhifeng said. "It's right by the pier."

After they left Guozhuang Village via the east road, Li Zhifeng carried You Miao on his back and the two strolled along the riverbank like a little married couple. Then You Miao realized with a start—they really *were* acting like a little married couple!

You Miao tugged on Li Zhifeng's ear and called, "Hey."

"Hm?" Li Zhifeng answered.

You Miao had wanted to tease Li Zhifeng but couldn't think of what to say, so he relaxed onto his back with his arms hanging lazily over his shoulders, dangling to and fro as he whispered against his ear, "Hey, I said, is the market far?"

He had already asked the question earlier and was obviously just messing with him now. He used to pull the same thing with Li Yan back in the capital, and it never got old. Every time he teased, Li Yan would shoot him a glare, smack him around, and then pull him in for a smooch.

Li Zhifeng's reaction, however, was to flush bright red.

"I said…" You Miao was practically pressed up right against his ear now.

Li Zhifeng cocked his head to look at You Miao, then abruptly pressed their lips together. You Miao closed his eyes. Being carried on his back and kissed like this felt like something accumulated in his heart was melting.

“Not too far.”

Their lips parted, and the blush on Li Zhifeng’s face remained as he continued walking.

You Miao stuck his finger in Li Zhifeng’s ear and twirled it. Li Zhifeng’s breathing sped up, and even his steps were faltering a little as he walked toward the river.

“Did I not satisfy you last night?” Li Zhifeng asked, his voice a little unsteady.

You Miao only snickered in response. The corners of Li Zhifeng’s lips tugged upward, and he said, “We’re here.”

They had arrived at the riverbank east of Guozhuang Village.

In the area where they were now, past the high cliffs near Riverwave Estate, the Yangtze River’s current slowed to a calm and waveless flow. There was a pier here dedicated to cargo ships from Shudong, Badong, and Jiang Prefectural City, which could travel downstream past Guozhuang Village after loading and or unloading and sail toward the northern part of Yang Prefecture.

There was a lively market right in front of the pier, stretching out for at least a mile and lined with stalls on either side. Half the stalls sold fish, while the other half peddled cosmetics, Su Prefecture embroideries, sea salt, food, and various everyday items. There was also a busker with three monkeys.

You Miao strolled around but didn’t see anything he wanted to buy, though he did want to eat fish. He picked out two large carps and said, “Let’s have this for dinner.”

Li Zhifeng carried the fish while they strolled around some more. There was a big ferry moored at the riverbank with its sails open, hollering, “River—crossing—!” The pair boarded the ship and tossed two copper coins into the bamboo canister, and the ferryman steered the ferry leisurely across the river.

“We should mark the borders of the estate,” You Miao said.

“Mn,” Li Zhifeng agreed. “We can fence it off. I’ll do it.”

“Actually, if we get some people to farm the land near Guozhuang Village, their families can watch over it. Then set up a couple of lookouts. That should suffice.”

Li Zhifeng nodded.

You Miao watched the river streaming past; the waters here in the Jiangnan region never froze over, which was a good thing. There really was too much to do: clear the wasteland, plant crops, build the waterwheel, recruit farmers… The manor still had to be fixed up, too.

You Miao licked his lips. Noticing the carps in Li Zhifeng’s hands that had their eyes rolled all the way back, he asked, “Carp is tasty, do you know how to cook it?”

“I know how to grill fish,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“I’ll leave it to you then, when we get back,” You Miao said.

The ferry reached the other shore, and You Miao asked how many roundtrips the ferry made per day before following the crowd off. The pier that the ferry was docked at was five miles outside of Riverwave Estate, and they had to walk back the rest of the way. When they got to the entrance of the estate, You Miao noticed a giant pit that was at least a dozen thousand square feet across and overgrown with grass.

“Is this a pond?” You Miao was astonished.

“You-shaoye.” A skinny man was squatting by the giant pit smoking tobacco with a long-stemmed pipe. When he saw You Miao, he greeted him with a smile on his face. “Shaoye went out? Didn’t see you around.”

“Yeah.” You Miao walked a little bit around the pit and asked, “You live around here? What’s your name again?”

The skinny man pointed nonchalantly to the west with the long-stemmed pipe, and smiled apologetically. “This humble one is called Zhu Tang. I just got yelled at by my wife, so I came out for a breather.”

You Miao nodded. After their first meeting yesterday, he knew this guy didn’t want to leave. When he said he got yelled at by his wife, it wasn’t

hard to guess that he must've gotten a good talking-to because he didn't succeed in asking for lower rent. You Miao didn't point this out, though.

"If I was to decrease your rent by ten percent, would you still leave?" You Miao asked with a grin.

Zhu Tang was dumbstruck. Just as he was about to nod, however, something stopped him. "I…have to go ask the wife."

"That's fine," You Miao said. "I already planned on lowering rent, but you all said you didn't want to farm anymore, so I didn't get a chance to say anything. Why don't you go home and discuss it with your wife? It's not easy to find a good land to farm nowadays. I'm not tricking you, and it's better to work for me than my dad."

Zhu Tang laughed brightly. "Shaoye is right. Even over by Guozhuang, the field lease is forty percent."

You Miao made an absent-minded noise of agreement, his attention glued to the large pit instead. This should've been a big lake, so how had the water run dry? The three walked along the lakebed and when they reached the westernmost side, You Miao spotted a creek.

He pointed at Anlu in the south and asked, "This pond dried out?"

"It's been dry for ten years," Zhu Tang replied. "There was water in the past, and Uncle Liang used to fish here too. In the spring and summer, the water even overflowed a bit when rain came down."

"Where does that creek lead to?"

"Anlu Village," Zhu Tang answered. "This estate is good with everything except water."

You Miao nodded slowly, ideas settling in his mind. He gave a pat to Zhu Tang's shoulder, looking very mature, before he and Li Zhifeng headed back to the manor the way they came.

Time was moving too fast for You Miao; it was already past noon and he had barely done anything. The two craftsmen were a pair of brothers called Da-Liang and Xiao-Liang respectively,[55] and when they saw You Miao return, they handed him a piece of paper.

“Everything that needs to be repaired in the front courtyard is listed here if shaoye will take a look,” Da-Liang said.

The information drafted on the paper was also heavily marked with notes that ordinary folks wouldn’t have understood—but it was no issue for You Miao.

“Clean up and go wait in the main hall. I’ll be right over,” You Miao said.

He went into the study and spread open the “*Exploitations of the Works of Nature*.” Using it to match against what Da-Liang had measured, he changed a few items before taking the paper back out.

“Renovate based on this and we’re good.”

Da-Liang realized that You Miao was someone who knew the trade. “Shaoye also learned these crafts?”

Smiling, You Miao said, “My mom studied under the founding father once upon a time.”

Now the two craftsmen no longer dared to underestimate him, and they went to busy themselves measuring things out with rulers and marking places to repair with chalk and ink strings. You Miao returned to the study and motioned for Li Zhifeng to push the desk close to the divan, then he reclined on it and started to read.

“Shall I go supervise them?” Li Zhifeng suggested.

You Miao waved dismissively. “No need. They won’t try anything funny. All you need to do is to grill fish in a bit.”

The puppy had come and curled in front of the divan, wagging its tail. On the divan, You Miao was leaning against Li Zhifeng, who was holding him, his manly body emitting warmth. However, being held like this was distracting You Miao from his reading, and his mind began to wander to thoughts of simply ripping Li Zhifeng’s clothes off and committing debauchery inside the study in broad daylight. But the craftsmen were outside; they’d become a laughingstock if they were caught.

You Miao dug out the “*Treatise of Gongshu*[56]” and began to read it with relish. Soon, all his little agendas were snuffed and he became absorbed by

the mechanical drawings in the book.

Gongshu Ban and Mozi were equal in talent, and in this book, a very interesting mechanism was mentioned—a cliff wheel. You Miao's eyes lit up instantly, and he laid out the three books "*Mohist Classics*," "*Treatise of Gongshu*," and "*Exploitations of the Works of Nature*."

"The different types of waterwheels can actually be combined," You Miao mumbled to himself. Then he called out, "Bring over the charcoal stick… I want to see if…"

He laid out the map of Riverwave Estate on the desk. "If this waterwheel can be constructed, it'll be an investment of a million gains."

The waterwheel designs from Mozi and Gongshu were excellent, but they were not exactly suitable for Riverwave Estate. A daring plan had come to You Miao—he would combine the two types and build an apparatus upon the cliff that would last forever. If such a cliffside waterwheel could be built and a canal was dug, then over three hundred hectares of land in the southern part of the estate could be irrigated. The water would be directed from the river to the lake before flowing to Anlu Village via the creek. If it could be done, Riverwave Estate would truly become paradise on Earth.

Digging a canal was the easy part; the hard part was constructing a waterwheel with a chain belt on that hundred-yard-tall cliff. They would have to set up scaffolding on the cliff and hire at least a dozen craftsmen. And if the Yangtze flooded—which it often did—there was no guarantee the waterwheel would hold against the rising water levels. It was currently the lunar month in the middle of winter and the river's water level was low, so it was the perfect time to develop any water-related mechanics. If they missed this chance, then building anything after the ice sealing the Yangtze melted would require swimming.

There was no time to lose—they must act now.

You Miao said to Li Zhifeng, "Go to the riverside cliff and mark the ground for the direction the canal should flow from the line I drew here."

Li Zhifent didn't ask any questions; he simply nodded and left. As for You Miao, he stayed in the study for the rest of the afternoon, drawing and notating, calculating dimensions and water capacities to determine where to affix the chain, referencing both "*Mohist Classics*" and "*Treatise of Gonshu*" while he marked everything down.

The material acquisition, the scaffolding installation, and the actual building of the waterwheel… This would undoubtedly be a massive undertaking, and who knows if there would even be craftsmen out there willing to take on such a dangerous project that required climbing a cliff to install a chained waterwheel—or if anyone even had the skill.

While You Miao scribbled away, Li Zhuang came by with ink strings, line markers, cutters, hammers, saws, hatchets, and other such things, as well as iron nails and bitumen.

You Miao went out to the yard to meet him. "Did you get the cost estimate for the lumber?"

"To answer shaoye, it's all written here," Li Zhuang said with a smile and handed him a piece of paper. "Here. I can't read, but I had a scholar record it for me in case I forgot."

The paper was a list of Anlu's lumber prices from the more expensive black sandalwood, white poplar, and maple, to the cheaper birchwood and willow planks—everything was impeccably noted. You Miao sat down and ran through the list, mentally calculating how much it was going to cost to build this waterwheel.

Li Zhuang repeatedly shot glances at the craftsmen renovating Shen Garden before he sent them a greeting.

"Shaoye wants to build houses?" Li Zhuang asked.

"I want to build a waterwheel," You Miao answered absentmindedly. "Have water flow from the higher plains down. When spring comes, the reclaimed lands will need watering, no?"

Li Zhuang nodded in agreement. You Miao beckoned the three men.

"Why don't you all come and rest a while? Don't overwork yourselves."

With a long-stemmed pipe dangling in his mouth, Da-Liang came over to take a break, puffing smoke and chuckling. Even on this cold winter day, his back was drenched in sweat.

You Miao showed him his drawings. “What do you think of this?”

Da-Liang didn’t waste time on small talk and took the drawing for a glance. “Whoa! Shaoye, you’re trying to build a big stack here.”

“Do you think this can be done?” You Miao asked.

The drawing was of a chained waterwheel affixed to the cliffside. It was a humongous wooden wheel with a chain in the middle, pinned to the face of the cliff, and its rotation would be driven by the flow of the river. The wheel, in turn, would rotate a sprocket to lift scoops of water up the hundred-yard-tall cliff to dump into the canal.

Da-Liang was speechless. “Shaoye, what are you…”

“What?” You Miao looked at him with a wide grin. He knew that Da-Liang thought he was out of his mind, so he explained, “Look here, there’s also a sliding groove.”

You Miao pointed at the vertical sliding groove on the cliffside and said, “If the bearing of the waterwheel is fitted inside, then when the water level rises during a flood, the wheel will rise with it instead of being submerged. And if the water level drops during the dry season, the waterwheel will likewise lower with it. This way, it’ll spin year-round. As for the water scoops, they would be planks carrying large water tanks…”

“I get it, I get it.” Da-Liang nodded along. “I get what you’re doing, I’ve just never seen this kinda…”

Da-Liang looked at the drawing over and over again.

“Let me know if you see any issues with it,” You Miao said. “What say you to staying here through New Year’s to make the parts for me? I’ll pay you well for it.”

“This, I can’t say,” Da-Liang replied. “I’ll have to go back and ask my teacher.”

“Then go do that when you’re free,” You Miao said.

Xiao-Liang piped up. “Our teacher loves weird stuff like this—”

“Watch your tongue!” Da-Liang was instantly angered and scolded him. “What the young master is studying is divine craft! You’re the one who doesn’t have the eye for it!”

Xiao-Liang obediently shut up. Da-Liang could tell that this waterwheel was something out of the ordinary, and he said, “I will make a trip back to Anping County.” Then, he left with a copy of You Miao’s drawing.

Come evening, Li Zhifeng had returned. “Everything’s marked.”

You Miao was still notating and making calculations with his head down.

Li Zhifeng prompted, “I’ll start digging tomorrow?”

You Miao laughed. “By yourself?”

“I can try,” Li Zhifeng replied. “It’s only manual labor.”

“All right,” You Miao said cheerfully. “Let’s dig a canal together.”

Li Zhifeng answered with a “mn” and went to make dinner. You Miao stretched. With the coming of night, Shen Garden fell even quieter—the only noise came from the puppy running back and forth, circling about Li Zhifeng and knowing that it was mealtime.

“Are we having fish?” You Miao was as excited as the dog.

Li Zhifeng grunted, the corners of his lips hanging a smile as he slit the stomach of a carp and stripped the gills. The big carp was still flopping, making the puppy bark wildly at it.

Li Zhifeng washed both carp clean and applied a heavy layer of salt and black bean sauce, stuffing their stomachs full of ginger slices, star anise, and dill. He smeared a layer of lard on the scales, and then pierced the bodies with two iron skewers each, crisscrossed. He then stacked the fish over the campfire in the yard to grill.

Once the aroma started wafting, You Miao’s drool immediately began to roll. He exclaimed, “I’ll go make the rice!”

After he had covered the steamer pot and came back out, You Miao asked, “Is it ready yet?”

Li Zhifeng gave You Miao a look. “No.”

“Is it ready yet?” You Miao asked.

“No,” Li Zhifeng replied expressionlessly.

“Is it ready yet?” You Miao asked.

“No,” Li Zhifeng replied.

“Is it ready yet…?”

“No…”

The two continued their boring question and answer session until the scales grilled to a beautiful golden color. The meat sizzled as the grease dripped down. At last, You Miao’s eyes saw stars and he collapsed in Li Zhifeng’s arms, unmoving.

Li Zhifeng started to laugh, and he brought them into the main house with one hand holding You Miao and the other holding the two fish. You Miao dug in as soon as he was seated, ravenous. This time, it tasted just right. The skin of the carp was crispy and delicious, the fish meat tender and fresh, but it was the fish maw that was the tastiest—thanks to the green onions, ginger, and other such seasonings that were used to stuff the stomach mingling with the lard fused within, it was truly the number one delicacy in the world.

You Miao wolfed down two bowls of rice and was so stuffed that he lazed on the bed, unable to move. Only then did Li Zhifeng mix the remaining fish sauce with some rice to feed the dog, and he himself squatted in the corridor to have his meal.

CHAPTER 13

Early the next day, angry voices woke You Miao from his slumber.

“He’s not up yet, you can’t go in!” Li Zhifeng was practically raging.

The voice of an elderly man was even more outraged, however. “Are you gonna kill me for it?!”

Startled, You Miao swiftly got out of bed and ran into the yard in bare feet. Da-Liang was there standing behind an old man, and said old man was lambasting Li Zhifeng, pointing at him with his cane. Li Zhifeng would have none of it, however, and caught the other end of the cane in his grip.

“Oh hey, wait a minute,” You Miao called out.

Li Zhifeng defused somewhat, and You Miao said to the old man, “Sir, will you please wait in the main hall?”

“You’re the one who called this old man over,” the old man accused gruffly. “How can you make your elder wait when you’re the one who invited me?!”

You Miao’s temper instantly flared, thinking, *Who the heck are you*? But just when he was about to shout back, the old man scolded, “You snoozed until midday, young man. So self-indulgent and lazy—there’s no hope for you!”

He raised his cane again as he spoke, ready to strike, and Li Zhifeng’s face instantly changed. He was about to shove the old man aside when You Miao hastily stopped him, afraid he wouldn’t mind his strength and accidentally take a life, which would only worsen the situation.

“Sir, you are absolutely right. I have learned,” You Miao said.

The old man harrumphed hard, stamping his cane on the ground. You Miao hadn’t meant what he said, yet the moment the words “I’ve learned”

left his lips, something clicked.

"I won't oversleep in the future," You Miao promised.

"A man must account for himself. You want to build something up from nothing, found your own proper business, and make something of yourself? You can't be lazy, then," the old man stated, stern in his lecture, while he leaned on his cane. "Come to the hall when you're done with breakfast."

You Miao nodded fervently as the old man walked away with Da-Liang.

Only then did Li Zhifeng go to assist You Miao's dressing and washing. You Miao's mind was entirely filled with the old man's lecture from earlier as he brushed up. It was true—when it was You Miao's father spewing these great life lessons, You Miao would refuse to accept them. Yet right now, having a complete stranger tell him the same things felt like a bat to the head, knocking him awake.

"Go get some Sunshower Qingfeng,[57]" You Miao said. "Brew tea for that old man, and be more polite."

"All right," Li Zhifeng said, and turned and left.

You Miao washed his own face, and when Li Zhifeng returned, he asked, "What did he say?"

"He said you're a promising boy, worthy to be taught," Li Zhifeng answered.

Done with washing his face, You Miao looked up and flashed Li Zhifeng a smile. You Miao ate his breakfast as quickly as he could and hurried to the main hall. Once seated, Da-Liang finally made the formal introduction for him.

"You-shaoye, this is my master. Everyone addresses him as Master Huang."

"This young one greets the teacher. I am You Miao," You Miao said humbly.

You Miao bowed in courtesy, and Old Craftsman Huang didn't decline the show of respect, accepting it with open arms.

“Liang Bin[58] came back last night and showed me this drawing,” Master Huang said. “Did you design this yourself?”

Not daring to take credit, You Miao replied, “This is something I came up with after reading ‘*Mohist Classics*,’ ‘*Treatise of Gongshu*,' and ‘*Exploitations of the Works of Nature*.' Please enlighten me, sir, if there are any issues.”

“There are issues everywhere.” Old Craftsman Huang rose to his feet. “Where do you plan on setting this thing up? Bring me there. Liang Bin, go back to your work. You Miao, you lead the way.”

You Miao noticed that when Old Craftsman Huang was around, Da-Liang was as quiet as a mouse, and only answered a “yessir” in deference when he was spoken to at the end. This went to show that Old Craftsman Huang was extremely strict with his students, so You Miao was on his best behavior and didn’t dare to drop formalities as he led the way to the cliff, beckoning Old Craftsman Huang to follow him.

“Sir.” You Miao presented the blueprint to Old Craftsman Huang. “I want to install the waterwheel there, but I haven’t had the chance to dig the canal yet.”

“If this construction project is a go, it won’t be something that’ll be done in a day or two,” Old Craftsman Huang said. “And it’s going to take money. Are you sure about this?”

You Miao was only familiar with theory; he had never actually carried it out in practice. He responded, “How many days would this take?”

“The waterwheel aside, the canal alone would take at least fifty laborers and a month if you want to dig all the way to the front of the village,” Old Craftsman Huang said.

You Miao then asked where he could find the laborers, but Old Craftsman Huang only shook his head.

“Dig out the canal first and I’ll find you the construction craftsmen.”

The government handled the levy of corvée workers, and as You Miao was new to the land and a stranger to the locals, not to mention New Year’s

was drawing close, he would probably have to wait until year-end before he could call on the local authorities. Old Craftsman Huang himself lived in Yang Prefecture, and for the time being, he had agreed to fabricate bits and pieces of the waterwheel parts with the drawing You Miao gave him. With his help, You Miao knew the waterwheel project was likely going to be a success.

The more troublesome issue was the fifty laborers required to dig the canal. Things were becoming more and more convoluted; a great big mess. At the beginning, You Miao only wanted to find something to occupy his time; he hadn't expected that one problem would lead to more. Planting the fields needed a waterwheel, the waterwheel needed lumber and a canal, and now he needed to recruit labor… Problems were popping out of the woodwork in droves, and they were all going to cost a pretty penny.

Hiring fifty laborers was no small feat—and he hadn't the money!

Feeling worried, You Miao hurried back to Shen Garden as soon as he saw Old Craftsman Huang off. The two craftsmen were still banging and hammering about while Li Zhifeng was by the well washing an iron shovel.

"Back? What did he say?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Gotta spend money, hire people," You Miao answered. "It all comes down to money, left right and center. What…what are you doing?"

"I'm gonna go dig a canal," Li Zhifeng replied.

Recalling what they talked about the night before, You Miao said, "Let's go. I'll come along, too. Together, together."

It was a peaceful day out; the wind was gentle, and the sun was radiant. Big, fluffy dandelions blanketed the open country, and when the river wind breezed past, the white puffs would take off and dance in the wind.

As Li Zhifeng drove the horse-drawn wagon toward the first field on the high plains, a completely relaxed and happy You Miao gazed at the river, a shovel in his arms.

"It's right here," Li Zhifeng said. "The parameters you marked yesterday."

“How long?” You Miao asked.

“About fifteen miles.”

Fifteen miles. Walking that distance would make You Miao collapse from exhaustion. And truthfully, he was already quite tired after having walked from Shen Garden to here and then back, and then returning again with a shovel.

“Okay, okay, let’s dig,” You Miao sighed, feeling resigned.

“Sit and rest,” Li Zhifeng said. “I can do it.”

Fifteen miles. If he dug sixty yards a day, a mile a month, then it’d take him a year and three months… You Miao gripped his shovel, suddenly feeling the magnitude of this construction project. However, Li Zhifeng simply rolled up his sleeves, stuck his shovel into the dirt, and started digging.

The earth here was very hard, and there was also a layer of rock underneath it. The top part of the soil was easier to dig, but the deeper they went, the more difficult it became. Nevertheless, Li Zhifeng dug and tossed earth like he was cutting tofu.

As always, You Miao thought that Li Zhifeng was literally the most powerful man on Earth. He could fight, he could cook, and he had the guts to kill men and fowl and fish alike. It was as if he had a reservoir of strength that never depleted. He was practically a different person compared to when they had first met. You Miao couldn’t believe Li Yan would lock such a gem inside a firewood shed and feed him drugs, and think of beating him to death, too. What a waste.

But then again, if Li Zhifeng had submitted to Li Yan, he wouldn’t be this useful. Li Yan usually dealt in the political scene, but Li Zhifeng knew nothing about playing that game or forming advantageous cliques. He couldn’t fight and kill people in the capital either, nor would he be needed to wait on Li Yan.

It was only after he followed the unfortunate You Miao that he found a purpose beyond being a bed companion. But this was also precisely why You Miao was unable to part from Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng dug a pit while You Miao crouched and watched as the pit gradually deepened to the size of half a man. Afraid he'd exhaust himself, You Miao reminded him incessantly, "Okay, take a break."

"No need," Li Zhifeng answered.

Drenched in sweat, Li Zhifeng stood inside the pit he dug himself and stripped off his outer jacket, handing it to You Miao. It was freezing out, and now that his bare, toned back was exposed as he dug and dug, You Miao was scared he might catch a cold.

He called out again, "Let's just hire people to do the digging after all. I'm worried about you."

Li Zhifeng smiled and shook his head.

Two whole hours later, Li Zhifeng had dug a hole about thirty yards in length. Up on the ground level, You Miao had been shoveling the earth and piling it onto the wagon for the horse to haul away. But he was done for after only one round of that. His palms burned with the red marks from gripping the shovel, and they throbbed painfully. When he returned to the pit, Li Zhifeng was finally sitting by the edge of it to take a break, and looked a little tired.

"I've gotten old," Li Zhifeng lamented. "Can't go on."

You Miao burst out laughing, and the two moved to sit in the grass, cuddling. You Miao felt that familiar warmth in his heart again.

This wouldn't do. If they kept digging like this, they were going to waste their entire lives here. Labor would need to be recruited. You Miao had never done a job like this before and hadn't realized how insignificant the power of one man was—but now he did. There were many things that couldn't be done alone simply by acting on it. This endeavor he'd undertaken was to literally dig a whole mountain, like Mister Gump and His Mountain.[59]

You Miao took out a charcoal stick and started scribbling on a plank.

"What's this?" Li Zhifeng asked.

“I’m crunching numbers to see how much money it’ll take to complete both the waterwheel and the canal,” You Miao said.

The waterwheel needed lumber, scaffolding needed to be built by the cliffside, and they needed to dig an affixation point on the cliff, which called for canisters of explosives. Moreover, the blades of the waterwheel would require the finest lumber to ensure it would continue to scoop water for decades to come, and that also meant thick, waterproof paint and bitumen. The waterwheel work would have to be done by skilled trade craftsmen as well; ordinary construction workers wouldn’t be able to pull it off. Once the canal was dug, it needed to be paved with bricks to prevent leakage. This and that and everything added up to money, money, money.

“How much would it all cost?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“At least five hundred silver,” You Miao replied, to which Li Zhifeng nodded.

What You Miao lacked the most right now was money—he only had a hundred silver total in his possession. Money wouldn’t have been a problem at all had this been the past, a time when he had spent extravagantly.

Where was he going to get his hands on money? Old Craftsman Huang had already gone to fabricate parts and search for labor for him. After the new year, this project would need to be completed by spring, otherwise the situation would be completely different by the end of next year after everything had been exposed to the elements.

No money, no money, no money…money, money, money, money, money… You Miao chucked the charcoal stick away and screamed.

“Do you not have enough?” Li Zhifeng asked.

“Not even close,” You Miao replied, distaste written all over his face.

“Let me think of something,” Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao started in surprise. “You’ve got an idea?”

“I can try robbing the local government.”

“...”

“Five hundred silver, you said?”

You Miao was startled, shocked, stunned, and completely speechless. He had thought Li Zhifeng was joking at first, yet turned out the man was serious.

“Don’t you dare do anything funny!” he replied hastily. “All government money is stamped—when people say ‘patterned silver,’ they meant government silver, because the ingots are engraved. Even if you steal the money, you won’t be able to use it. All that can accomplish is getting us arrested!”

Li Zhifeng answered with a “mn,” and You Miao added, “Whatever will I do if you get executed?”

Li Zhifeng smiled and nodded at that. At the sight of his nonchalant face, You Miao repeated his admonishment, “Do *not* do anything funny, all right? Under any circumstances!”

Li Zhifeng made a noise of acknowledgment and jumped back into the pit to continue digging. You Miao mentally reminded himself again and again that, at all costs, he must not let Li Zhifeng rob the government coffers. The guy was totally fearless, and he’d end up doing in the both of them.

Li Zhifeng dug for an entire day, and only spoke when the sun was setting in the west. “Let’s go home and make you some dinner. Then I’ll come back later tonight.”

“Don’t bother coming back later, just cuddle me to sleep,” You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng grinned. “Okay.”

After an entire day’s grind, only about four yards had been excavated. You Miao wanted to cry.

“Don’t bother coming tomorrow, I’ll think of another way.”

Li Zhifeng didn’t respond and only hauled the tools up to the wagon. They transported and dumped all the earth somewhere farther away before Li Zhifeng leisurely drove the wagon home.

“We should get a few donkeys,” Li Zhifeng said. “People in Anlu told me that donkeys are very useful, and if we’re sowing fields, we’ll need some cattle, too.”

“All right…”

You Miao had already wilted. He could count all he wanted, but the meager amount of money in his possession wasn’t going to change. All the outsiders probably thought that since he was the little young master of Sunshower Tea Estate, he must be rolling in money. But other than the few trunks of fox pelts he’d brought from home, which could maybe get him another one or two hundred silver at most, he had nothing.

The tea couldn’t be sold. Shen Garden would have to receive guests sometimes; if the Lord County Magistrate came calling, what tea could he serve him otherwise? His net wealth was but a drop in the bucket. If only he could get his hands on one or two thousand silver…

Nevertheless, You Miao would never go home and ask his old man for money. All sorts of thoughts were filling his mind. What if he set all this aside for the moment and went out to do his reselling business for a few days? Or maybe if he wrote letters to borrow money from those in the capital? And agree to make repayments in the autumn with a twenty percent dividend… But while the loans were certain, the profit was not. When the time came, if he couldn’t cough up the money, he would end up betraying his good pals’ trust.

Out in the yard, Li Zhifeng was killing a chicken. The spotted puppy chased the chicken as it squawked and ran all over the place; blood still spilling from its neck as it dashed for its life. Li Zhifeng went into the kitchen and re-emerged with a pot of boiling water, then snapped a stick off a branch and nonchalantly flung it—piercing right through the chicken’s head.

“Nice!”

In that instant, You Miao forgot all his troubles and clapped vigorously.

Dangling the chicken in one hand, Li Zhifeng took it into the kitchen to pluck its feathers. Being the boy that he was, You Miao dropped everything and chased after him.

“You’re so amazing at archery! That accuracy!” You Miao gushed.

The corners of Li Zhifeng’s lips quirked upward. He sat there on a small stool plucking the chicken, and after a quick grunt in response, he asked, “Why don’t you praise me for my skills in bed too?”

You Miao started to laugh, reaching over to touch Li Zhifeng’s face, and the two sat together inside the dim kitchen. The water boiled, and as it bubbled with steam, You Miao felt his heart stir, aroused in spite of himself.

You Miao huddled closer, but Li Zhifeng said, “My face is dirty, it’s all covered in mud.” Still, he turned his head and softly kissed his lips.

At this moment, You Miao couldn’t help but think that money was but a trivial issue. If he could live his days like this, it’d be an extremely happy life.

“I’m starving,” You Miao started to whine. “When can we eat?”

“Soon,” Li Zhifeng replied. “Won’t be long.”

Once the chicken was plucked and butchered, Li Zhifeng cleaned it thoroughly and placed it whole inside a clay pot. He added three bowls of water to the pot before setting the whole thing to steam in a bigger pot filled with boiling water. After only a few moments, the aroma began to waft and diffuse the air, and lured the starving Da-Liang and Xiao-Liang into constantly peeking into the kitchen.

That night, You Miao’s eyes literally shone with a ravenous glint as a fat steamed chicken was set on the table. Li Zhifeng cut all the tender parts of the drumsticks and wings and laid them out neat and tidy for You Miao to start first. Chicken breast, chicken rump, the rib cage, and all the rest were carved as well. The less tender, bonier parts were packed alongside a bucket of rice and two shots of liquor, then brought outside for the two craftsmen.

“Come and eat too,” You Miao called.

Li Zhifeng sat down at the table and You Miao put a drumstick in his bowl, so he ate it. He ate whatever You Miao gave him. You Miao himself ate three giant bowls of rice; he stuffed himself so full that his tummy was round, and sat there slumped over the chair. Li Zhifeng gave him a cup of tea and went to clean up the dishes.

Life was honestly so wonderful, You Miao thought. In all the times that he'd pigged out in the capital, never had he eaten anything that tasted as good as the chicken tonight. A man had really had to be hungry in order to truly eat.

"I found a cellar in the kitchen backyard," Li Zhifeng said.

"What's inside?" You Miao asked. "Not dead bodies, I hope?"

"Eighty jugs of fine wine," Li Zhifeng replied.

You Miao was utterly stunned by the news.

"Shall I bring one out for a taste?" Li Zhifeng inquired.

"Nah, it's okay, I'm already full," You Miao said. "But that must be some extraordinary wine. Take me there to check it out?"

Li Zhifeng led You Miao to the backyard, and You Miao discovered that there really was a cellar in Shen Garden's underground—and it hid nothing but the best Champion Reds[60]! After sitting in the cellar for over a century, they had become fine, rich brews. You Miao inwardly appraised their value. The eighty jugs of wine were all priceless treasures, and they could be served to guests in the future.

You Miao went to bed after finishing his tea, skipping his bath altogether. Around midnight, he heard Li Zhifeng splashing outside again and called out, "Come sleep inside."

Li Zhifeng tiptoed in after his cold bath and burrowed into the blankets, falling asleep holding You Miao. This man really was made of iron, You Miao thought.

Over the next few days, every morning Li Zhifeng would carry his shovel out to dig the canal. You Miao didn't have the energy to do the same anymore and told Li Zhifeng time and again that he didn't need to go either,

but the man would only leave wordlessly. You Miao didn't have anything else for him to do anyway, so he left him to it.

One morning, You Miao woke up earlier than usual, so he went to inspect Shen Garden starting from the main house. Home was starting to be fixed up, bit by bit. The doors and windows had been removed and their surfaces sanded off, and they lay waiting under the sun to be painted anew. Zhang Er came by very early in the morning to study, so You Miao had him supervise the repairs. Meanwhile, Li Zhuang's wife had also come to Shen Garden with a basket of eggs, saying she was going to cook for the young master—You Miao figured that Li Zhuang probably told her everything, so he wasn't likely to leave now. Thus, You Miao had her stay temporarily at Shen Garden to cook lunch for the workers.

You Miao was only eating two meals a day since moving to Shen Garden, but he had been rising earlier and earlier lately, so he was starving by noon. He packed all the food Li Zhuang's wife made into two containers, then hopped onto the horse and took the meal to the high plains with the intention of having it together with Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhuang was there as well, standing on top of a dirt mound watching Li Zhifeng—who had been digging for five days now, and the canal had gained some thirty-five yards The sight alone made You Miao feel tired.

"Lunch time!" You Miao called as he delivered the food.

Li Zhifeng had gotten somewhat tanned from working under the sun for the past few days, and his face was covered in dirt. He climbed out of the canal and sat on the nearby ground with a huff.

"We were just talking about it, shaoye, and you show up," Li Zhuang said with a chuckle.

You Miao took the chance to compliment him. "Your wife cooks well."

Li Zhifeng took the proffered clay pot and lifted the cover, revealing salted pork fried with winter bamboo shoots laid over a pot full of rice. He instantly dug in and started wolfing everything down.

"Let's hire more help, yeah? So you're not stuck digging this thing forever," You Miao said as he ate.

“Strength diminishes if you don’t use it,” Li Zhifeng said. “Even if I’m not digging, I’ll still need to train somehow. This is fine.”

Li Zhuang crouched by the mound and laughed. “Digging a canal would take too long using one man’s power alone.”

“I’ll think of something come spring. See if I can find some laborers,” You Miao said.

As the three chatted, You Miao shared half of his rice with Li Zhifeng. It was obvious Li Zhifeng was ravenous and thirsty; he was gulping down water nonstop. When You Miao asked Li Zhuang when he was moving, Li Zhuang answered, “I discussed it with my wife, and we’re not leaving anymore. We’ll farm the fields for shaoye.”

You Miao started to laugh. “Lovely. What changed your mind?”

Li Zhuang shook his head, resigned. “It’s not easy to find work in Yang Prefecture right now; I can’t find anything. I was originally planning on joining my little uncle, but he offended an official recently and was punished with a beating. The family runs a general store, but they’re not looking to hire anyone either. If I go, I’d be a nuisance and a waste of space.”

“Well, ain’t that the truth,” You Miao said. “Rather than relying on others, it’s much better to depend on yourself to make a living.”

“If it wasn’t for shaoye, who would want to stay in this estate forever?!” Li Zhuang said. “No one managed the harvests, and no one said anything about building canals when there were droughts or floods. Same time every year, Sunshower Tea Estate would send someone over to collect rent, unrelenting and caring nothing for how good the yield was or whether it fetched a good price.”

“Since Riverwave Estate has been handed to me, I of course won’t neglect you guys, so don’t worry about that,” You Miao said.

“Indeed. We know shaoye is a good person,” Li Zhuang said with a chuckle. “You even told Zhu Tang that you’d lower his rent by ten percent…”

You Miao was amused; news certainly traveled fast around here. Without skipping a beat, he replied, “All the same, your rent will go down too, as will Uncle Liang’s. I rent will be the same for everyone, and you can pay it to me directly. I’ll collect the payment whenever you pay it. If you can’t make it on time, a few days’ delay isn’t a problem, so no need to sell your wives and daughters over it… I’m an easygoing kinda guy.”

Li Zhuang nodded repeatedly, smiling. You Miao could tell that after this, the four tenant houses would know he was not a cruel landlord. Other than Zhang Er, who would no longer farm because he was preparing to attend the exams at the capital, the other three houses probably wouldn’t be leaving anymore.

You Miao’s mind wasn’t on their fields anyway, since their bit of land didn’t make much money to begin with. The priority right now was to lease out the wastelands as soon as possible. But in order to reclaim land, there needed to be water; and in order to get water, there needed to be a waterwheel and a canal… After going around in circles, in the end, he still returned to the waterwheel problem.

Truly, a hero can be defeated by a single coin… The Jiangnan region was abundant in wealthy merchants, so perhaps he could loan out some land? Bring in some rich guys from Yang Prefecture and coax them to help pay for the canal and waterwheel in exchange for land, then hire some farmhands to sow said land for them? That idea might work, except he had no idea how many would actually be willing to open their wallets. This was where You Miao fell short—his age. Most businessmen were around You Dechuan’s age, so if he called on them, he’d look like nothing but a child and his words would naturally have less weight.

He was deep in thought over this issue when a guest called on the estate. Li Zhifeng stood up to look. Someone who seemed to be a messenger whistled from the distance, and the man hopped off his horse and bowed.

“My apologies for disturbing You-shaoye. I am a humble officer by the name of Tang Hui. I’ve come from the capital with an urgent letter, and was told it must be personally delivered to your hands.”

You Miao was surprised at first by the sight of a man in military gear, but he soon recalled how Nie Dan had been the one to deliver a letter last time. Immediately, he knew who the letter was from—it had to be Zhao Chao!

"Let me see!" You Miao exclaimed in delight.

Tang Hui pulled a letter from his breast pocket and very respectfully handed it to You Miao with both hands. It was indeed Zhao Chao's name on the envelope, and You Miao was cheered at once.

"Let's talk back at Shen Garden," You Miao said. "Li Zhifeng, come back and rest too, stop digging."

Tang Hui glanced at the canal, but didn't say anything. Instead, he followed after You Miao as he led the group back to Shen Garden. When Li Zhuang saw that the newcomer was an officer with influence who paid such respect to You Miao, his attitude changed significantly. The moment they returned, he went off to help his wife clean the manor.

Once they had settled in the main hall, You Miao instructed Li Zhifeng, "Go bring the tea from the topmost lattice in the study."

"I mustn't bother You-shaoye any longer," Tang Hui quickly said.

You Miao smiled. "No need to be so polite. You're an officer and I have no title, so it should be me calling you 'sir.'"

You Miao had an excellent impression of soldiers. He'd been rescued by Yanbian's soldiers, and it had also been the military who helped him after re-entering the pass. He knew to repay kindness where it was due. Moreover, Zhao Chao seemed to be very familiar with the military, since he had sent soldiers to deliver his messages every time. As they say, he that loves the tree loves the branch.

When Li Zhifeng returned with the tea set and tea leaves, You Miao took them with a smile and chided him, "Go take a bath now. I'll be chatting with the officer."

Li Zhifeng nodded, then turned to exit the hall.

Thus, You Miao personally brewed a pot of tea for Tang Hui. He stirred the finest green tea within a ceramic bowl, the leaves rustling as they were

agitated, and poured scalding water over a set of teacups to heat them. When water washed over the green lotus cups that were dotted with golden carps at the bottom, the lotuses would shimmer as if they were made of glass; even the golden carps looked almost alive. This set was part of the dowry his mother brought with her when she married You Dechuan.

Tang Hui was a man with a good eye and recognized the goods. “They all say You-shaoye’s family is a prominent clan, and it truly shows. Even the Prefectural Governor’s household wouldn’t be able to have such an elaborate tea.”

You Miao grinned proudly. “It's nothing but freeloading on goods from my parents. This toy is something my mom brought with her when she married. My dad doesn’t like me now, so he placated me with all my mom’s things and booted me out.”

Tang Hui smiled and shook his head. “My dad couldn’t stand the sight of me either, so he sent me here to Jiangnan when I was young.”

“Oh?” You Miao was interested. “You’re not from Jiangnan, sir?”

Judging by his accent, You Miao didn’t think he was.

“I’m from Hebei,[61]” Tang Hui replied. “We’re not that far apart in age, so if you don’t mind it, you can simply call me Tang Hui.”

“Let me call you da-ge, then,” You Miao said with a smile.

As he brewed the tea, he thought to himself that it did no harm to build connections. Tang Hui’s visit was different from Nie Dan’s; Nie Dan had been travel-worn, having come all the way from the capital, and he had a civil official tagging along. Tang Hui, on the other hand, showed up in clean and tidy armor and on a horse that wasn’t tired out. It was obvious that he was a military officer stationed nearby—maybe he was the officer in charge of Yang Prefecture’s defense.

Just when You Miao was about schmooze harder, however, Tang Hui hastily declined, “Oh no, I don’t deserve that title. You mustn’t say so.”

You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that.

While they conversed, the leaves being roasted upon the brazier began to emit a soft, refreshing fragrance. All at once, the hall was filled with the ambrosial smell of tea; a scent which Tang Hui praised incessantly. Once the water was brought to boil three times, You Miao made a show of sprinkling the leaves into the teapot and infusing them into hot water. After the first pour, which cleansed the tea, he filled a cup seven parts full. The tea was faintly green and the sweet smell of it was pleasant to the nose. He personally handed the cup to Tang Hui.

You Miao might not be good at anything else, but the art of tea brewing was a craft he'd learned directly from Sunshower Tea Estate. Not even the Crown Prince's faction was able to taste tea brewed by You Miao very often. While many rich kids were only pretending to be refined, Li Yan understood the art and understood it profoundly, which was another reason why he doted on You Miao so much.

It could be said that for all the glory the grand capital possessed, only three people were able to extract this particular flavor from Jiangnan tea: a particular individual from the palace, a particular individual from Tingyu Pavilion, and You Miao himself. No one more.

The only reason You Miao was personally brewing tea was because he wanted to befriend Tang Hui. With the tea poured and served, You Miao opened the letter and focused his attention on its contents.

After praising the tea several times, Tang Hui drank it quietly while his mind seemed to wander. You Miao read the letter swiftly; there wasn't anything of note aside from Zhao Chao's advice and counsel. In You Miao's previous letter, all he had done was complain about his present state. He mentioned the imminent takeover of Riverwave Estate and that he was thinking of only bringing Li Zhifeng with him, that his dad didn't want him anymore, et cetera.

Thus, Zhao Chao's response was: *Xiandi, it is good that you bear such ideas. After all, for a man to be born on this Earth, it is to achieve naught but great things, and only in establishing himself with great vigor does he not live this life in vain—going out with a bang, so to speak.* The letter went on to mention that he was also often met with scorn from his father. With a

favored older brother above him, he would rather leave the house and seek his own entertainment than stick around at home.

You Miao knew that Zhao Chao and the military were close, so in reading the letter, he started to wonder if he was the son of some great general. The current imperial court placed all emphasis on civil service and none on the military, and thus, the civil officials looked down on military officers. As they say, good men don't become soldiers; good iron doesn't hammer nails.

One had to brand their troop number on the side of their face once enlisted, and it was a low status with meager pay. The position of a field marshal was only equal to a civil official of the fourth rank, and he enjoyed no real power aside from commanding the defense army—a power that rotated and changed hands every two years. One could say that in the Tianqi's court, a soldier couldn't even compare to a Xiucai. Serving in the military meant protecting the homeland, but the military was unjustly suppressed at every level of government purely because the founder of the nation feared military coups.[62]

In the letter, Zhao Chao also mentioned that if You Miao couldn't carry on in Jiangnan anymore, he should write to him and come to the capital. Once he was there, Zhao Chao would find a way to arrange a government position for him and whatnot. Then he added that the Jiangnan region—Yang Prefecture in particular—was a place full of pleasurable distractions, so remember to study hard, work hard, and never slack off. He should not ever fool around in the red-light district, lest his ambitions diminish. Should he run into any difficulties, he could ask for assistance from the Department of Military Defense of Yang Prefecture.

In short—"*If you need money or men, just send the word. Gege will take care of you.*"

You Miao stared at the last sentence, astounded. Zhao Chao must've found out what kind of person You Miao had been back at the capital, but although the letter had meant to be a lecture, guidance and fondness was between each line. It made him want to cry. Setting the letter aside, he closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

Li Yan's letter hadn't come yet, so it was probably being delivered by the postal service.

"Zhao Chao's pretty quick in replying, huh? The bugger. I only sent my letter ten days ago, and his response is already here," You Miao commented.

"Sometimes, an epistolary relationship depends on how deeply the other party cares," Tang Hui replied with a smile. "Everyone is thinking of shaoye back at the capital. I hear the Chancellor's son was talking about you as well, so a response has nothing to do with how many days have passed."

You Miao was tickled pink and nodded enthusiastically.

Setting the teacup aside, Tang Hui added, "I was at the capital for debriefing, and have just returned from the residence of Nie Dan and His Highness the Third Prince."

"Mhmm, Nie Dan and His Highness the Third… *What*?! What did you say?!" You Miao exclaimed, causing a rattle on the table after nearly knocking over his own cup. Tang Hui darted forward and caught it before it fell.

The two stared at each other speechlessly for a long time.

At last, You Miao stammered out, "That bugger, Zhao Chao…is…"

The dumbfounded expression on Tang Hui's face was exceptionally colorful.

Utterly thunderstruck, You Miao spun around and grabbed a ceramic bowl. Clutching it in his hands, he asked, "S-s-say…say it again?"

"S-say…say what?"

"What did you say Zhao Chao was again? Say it again?" You Miao urged.

Something seemed to have dawned on Tang Hui, and he said, "Zhao… His Highness the Third Prince has a single character name—Chao."

Mouth agape, You Miao smashed the ceramic bowl onto the ground. It shattered into pieces with a loud *crack*.

"…"

"…"

Li Zhifeng stepped in, having taken his bath, and asked, "What's going on?"

You Miao absent-mindedly waved him away. "Go…bring me a brush and ink."

Li Zhifeng went back out to retrieve the stationery.

You Miao was so shaken he was dazed, and Tang Hui watched him, amused.

"You-shaoye didn't know about…His Highness?"

"We're acquainted, but he never told me he's the…the third prince…"

You Miao suddenly recalled what Zhao Chao had written in his letters, as well as what he had told him during their imprisonment. Wait, then in that case, Zhao Chao was likely neglected in the imperial palace. His brother was the Crown Prince! He was common-born! His dad was the Emperor… It all made sense now!

You Miao couldn't help but marvel. He sighed with mixed feelings and took the paper and brush from Li Zhifeng. "I'll reply to his letter right now."

Tang Hui nodded with a grin.

"So you saw Zhao Chao, then? How has he been lately?" You Miao asked.

Tang Hui cupped his fist and saluted to the north. "His Highness is still the same as ever."

You Miao grimaced. "I'm too used to saying his name…"

"It's fine," Tang Hui said. "His Highness cares for You-shaoye, naturally. If shaoye has any needs, please feel free to call on the guys at the

Department of Military Defense."

Something clicked with You Miao when he heard this, and understanding soon dawned on him. "Pardon my bluntness… What is your current position, sir?"

"Consulting Commandant of Yang Prefecture Regional Department of Military Defense, a military officer of the seventh rank," Tang Hui said.

You Miao nodded. A consulting commandant was basically a commander who managed the entire Yang Prefecture region, and one who'd been transferred directly from the imperial guard, no less. However, it was still only of the seventh rank. If he met the county magistrate of An County, a civil official of the sixth rank, he would still have to bow and call him "sir." It was a veritable pain.

You Miao wrote his reply, telling Zhao Chao of his own happenings. But he ripped it up halfway through and changed the content, reporting only happy news and none of his concerns. Deep within him, there was a sentiment that felt like it was on the verge of spilling over and flooding the paper.

"What about Officer Nie?" You Miao asked.

"Promoted," Tang Hui replied with a smile. "Deputy Army Supervisor of the Imperial Army."

You Miao laughed. "That's not an easy feat."

Tang Hui chuckled in understanding. "Indeed. Lord Nie also talked about You-shaoye, and he mentioned that he will visit Jiangnan again if time permits after New Year's."

You Miao nodded. He and Tang Hui both knew that it really wasn't easy for a man like Nie Dan to be promoted. It was usually extraordinarily difficult for military officers who didn't ingratiate themselves with civil officials to reach a deputy commander role within the imperial army. It had most likely been facilitated by Zhao Chao.

You Miao cheerfully added an invite for Nie Dan to come visit in the letter, then he asked conversationally, "Tang-da-ge is from Hebei, so how

are you settling in Jiangnan? How long have you been here?"

"I've been in the imperial army for five years," Tang Hui replied. "It's only with Lord Nie's recommendation that I was dispatched. I came to Yang Prefecture when I was twenty, and now, it's been six years."

"It's tough being away from home, things just aren't the same," You Miao said. "When is Tang-da-ge getting transferred back to the capital?"

Tang Hui shook his head, looking resigned. "I can't connect with any of the lords in the capital. If I'm lucky, maybe I can go back during next winter's defense rotation. The defense transfer papers are still stuck at the Ministry of War. How do I put this; Jiangnan is nice, but…"

An idea came to You Miao. "Is Tang-da-ge going to the capital after New Years?"

"Hard to say," Tang Hui replied. "What is it?"

You Miao knew that both Tang Hui and Nie Dan belonged to the same faction—the Third Prince's faction. Unfortunately, the founding father of the nation had used force to establish his reign, rendering his rule unjust. Thus, in order to prevent a military coup, he created the Bureau of Military Affairs and the Department of Surveillance. The two departments, along with the Ministry of War, formed a system that severely restricted the military and pushed their ranks to the bottom. Many despaired for achievements. The ones who were stationed at the capital were still better off; those who were dispatched to the territories could get neither payoffs nor power. In order to further slash the military's power, the officers would be transferred to the frontiers after a few years stationed at Yang Prefecture. That would be when the officers' pleas would truly be heard and heeded by no one.

"I'm an old acquaintance to both the Chancellor's son Li Yan and the Minister of Revenue's son Ping Xi." You Miao smiled. "If Tang-da-ge is going to the capital in the new year, won't you take the trouble of delivering letters and scrolls of calligraphy and paintings for me? Wait here, sir."

Tang Hui was instantly overjoyed. However, the truth was You Miao wasn't doing this all for him. Zhao Chao was building his own faction, and

You Miao didn't know how many people he had under his belt. But since Zhao Chao was showing Tang Hui favor, then sending Tang Hui to him must be in line with Zhao Chao's goals.

You Miao went to the back and retrieved three paintings, all of which were the works of Shen Garden's former owner, Lu You. In the past few days, he had already dusted and sun-dried the scrolls, and stamped them with his own collection seal. Others might not understand these paintings—never mind the art experts, even the prefectural governors and other lords didn't know how to appreciate them. But Li Yan absolutely would, and he'd know that these were one-of-a-kind and exclusively from Shen Garden.

"This one is for Li Yan, and this one is for Ping Xi." You Miao rolled up two paintings and tied them each with a red string. Then he smiled and said, "And this set of verses is for that royal bro of mine."

You Miao rolled open the third scroll to show Tang Hui. It was a poem, elegantly written in lively and vigorous calligraphy.

Outside the roadhouse, beside the broken bridge,

Blooming in lonesome unnoticed.

Outside the sun sets, I dwell in wistful solitude,

Enduring the rain and wind.

I care not to fight for spring,

Yet the flowers in jealousy do mire.

Petal by petal, I drop to dust,

And only the fragrance lasts ever after.[63]

"Nice poem!" Tang Hui praised in awe.

"This was the work of Shen Garden's master," You Miao said as he happily sat down.

With a swift stroke of his brush, he wrote a letter to Li Yan. The gist of it was: *The man delivering the painting is my good pal, so you gotta take care of him for me. When my estate is all set up, you can come visit any time of the year—stay however long you want and eat whatever you like. Call Ping-*

Er, Idiot Lin, Little Hubby Huang, and the others; call everyone to take a trip down south to Jiangnan. I'll take you all to listen to tunes and see the pretty ladies of Yang Prefecture…

The letter to the son of the Minister of War, on the other hand, was outrageously cheeky and nothing but frivolous silliness. The gist of it was: *I miss you, I miss you. I got you a painting 'cause I know you like this stuff. There's more in my house, so come down to Jiangnan and visit me when you're free. I'll cover everything. Take all the paintings and calligraphy you want. The officer bringing you the painting is my solid bro. His transfer papers are stuck with the Ministry of War, so think of a way to get your old man to accommodate him a little, yeah? I'll be forever in tears grateful for it.*

Tang Hui was the one "forever in tears grateful" watching You Miao work his magic. It was the first time he'd ever witnessed You Miao's ability to be so smooth and slick.

You Miao finished the letters and sealed them before handing them to Tang Hui. As he took them, Tang Hui said, "You Miao, gege will drop the formalities. Da-ge will definitely remember what you've done today."

"Don't worry about it." You Miao laughed. "It's no effort on my part."

You Miao knew that a small-time officer of the seventh rank like Tang Hui would be scorned everywhere he went in the capital. He couldn't exercise his full abilities in Jiangnan, either, so You Miao might as well send him to Zhao Chao to be used as an arm. Tang Hui needed to give gifts to make connections, but Nie Dan only had the Third Prince's faction in his circle, so Tang Hui would be out of luck if he wanted to knock on the door of the Crown Prince's faction.

All Tang Hui really needed was a chance to deliver letters like these. You Miao was also in a situation where he couldn't afford to offend either party. He had to grease and flex his connections at the capital more, so he might as well take this chance to show some grace.

When it came to writing his response to Zhao Chao, You Miao became more attentive, and composed a long reply in full seriousness. Since his mom passed away, there hadn't been many who treated You Miao as well as

Zhao Chao had. Li Zhifeng was one of them, but the concern Zhao Chao showed seemed to be different. You Miao understood all these feelings.

He knew perfectly well who as good to him and who looked down on him, and he expressed it all in the letter. He hoped that one day, he could travel to the capital in all his glory and wealth and help Zhao Chao out a little. You Miao's eyes grew hot in spite of himself, and started to sob as he wrote.

"You-di,[64] don't get too emotional, now," Tang Hui comforted, watching from the side.

"You don't get it." You Miao sniffed and sealed the letter. "Everyone knows to gild the lily, but so few know to offer help in times of need—those people are rare."

"That's it exactly." Tang Hui chuckled. "Gege also thinks that defeat is temporary, and there's always the opportunity for a comeback in the future."

You Miao nodded and smiled, stealing a glimpse of Li Zhifeng. Li Zhifeng was quietly standing by the table, looking the same as always—stoic.

Tang Hui tucked the letter away and You Miao stood to see him off. But Tang Hui thought of something and turned back around.

"What is your subordinate digging for? When I first arrived, you were sitting out there in the field, too. You're the young master, why are you doing hard labor like excavation?"

"I want to dig a canal," You Miao said with a laugh. "After winter started, everyone's gone home for New Year's and I can't find any temp workers, so I thought I'd do a little digging myself as a workout."

"Gosh!" Tang Hui responded immediately, "Why request for corvée labor? Gege's got plenty of people. I can drag a hundred men over, and we'll get it done in half a month. How long will it even take with the way *you're* doing it?"

You Miao had already expected Tang Hui to suggest this and quickly said with a smile, “It’s no problem at all; thanks so much, da-ge. Are the guys from the Department of Military Defense? How much is the pay per day?”

“Why talk about money?” Tang Hui said. “We were just troubling ourselves about having no place to go for winter training, so it’s free of charge. You helped gege with his matters, and I haven’t even thanked you…”

“Oh no, that won’t do,” You Miao declined hastily.

“There really is no need for pay,” Tang Hui insisted. “Soldiers are all on salary, so even if we don’t come help you, we still have to find some construction work to do. The way I see it, there’s still quite a bit of wasteland around here. I’ll send over a centurion, and the men can cultivate the land for you too…”

You Miao was instantly beside himself with joy, and tackle-hugged Tang Hui around the waist. “You’re my real brother now! Take all the calligraphy and paintings that you like! Order any kind of tea you want to drink!”

Tang Hui didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Don’t say that. All this brotherly address is fine if it’s just casual, but make sure you don’t slip when you go to the capital. The one in the Palace of Yande is your real gege…”

You Miao clung to Tang Hui, rubbing himself against him and patting him on the back, trying to burrow himself deep into his arms and act all kittenish—and nearly kissed him.

With his handsome face blushing beet red, Tang Hui said, “All right, all right, I’ll have the guys come in a few days. There’s still a moat we have to repair outside the Prefectural Government Office. Gege has to supervise the work, so I won’t be coming myself. I’ll send you someone nice…”

“No need to trouble you to come again,” You Miao quickly said. “When the guys come, I’ll offer them liquor, and I’ll cover all the meals.”

Tang Hui nodded, then hopped onto the horse and bade You Miao farewell before trotting off. Those in the military were all down-to-earth,

and interacting with them was different from interacting with civil officials. When you treated them even a bit nicely, they would literally die for you.

“This is great!”

When You Miao returned to his room, he pushed Li Zhifeng onto the bed and burrowed into his arms, feeling him up and groping him all over, rolling here and there.

CHAPTER 14

The next day when You Miao rose, he went out to run errands personally. Taking thirty silver and Li Zhifeng with him, he was ready to purchase a hundred men's worth of food supplies.

"Won't that be too many people?" Li Zhifeng asked.

You Miao had been so overtaken by delight yesterday that it had only just hit him that perhaps there might be too many heads. Fortunately, he only needed to feed them for about half a month. If he had to feed them for a whole year, he'd be eaten out of his house and home. A pound of rice per person a day was a hundred pounds a day…which was close to one tael of silver. And that didn't include other stuff like meat and vegetables. *And* he had to offer liquor, too!

Tang Hui managed over ten thousand soldiers, all paid through the prefecture's accounts. It certainly was a huge expense to feed so many.

Even if labor was free for the canal excavation, it still couldn't be done without spending at least fifty silver. Every time You Miao started to count money, he would regret the lavish way he squandered in the capital. Have some fun with fighting crickets, cover a meal, and that was easily fifty silver down the drain.

Li Zhifeng haggled at the produce stand and bought a large cart of carrots and two whole butchered pigs. When he noticed You Miao eyeing him, he asked, "What is it?"

"You're worth five canals, you know," You Miao said.

Li Zhifeng grinned. "When Li Yan bought me, he only spent twelve silver."

You Miao let loose a wail. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?!"

“I didn’t want you to be vexed by the knowledge that you had overspent when buying me,” Li Zhifeng replied drily.

You Miao was seriously speechless.

Clenching his teeth, You Miao spent all the money that couldn’t be spared. They bought four donkeys and four carts, and hauled home a cart of carrots, a cart of potatoes, a cart of cured meat and sausages, and a cart of liquor. And all this was only half of what was needed; they would have to go back for a second round later. Two trips back and forth, and it was merely enough to feed a hundred people for half a month.

You Miao had spent every last coin of the thirty silver he brought with him, as well as the twenty silver Li Zhifeng had on him. A few drivers were hired to drive the carts, and by the time they had reached the entrance of the estate, the centurion had already arrived with his one hundred soldiers.

You Miao laughed. “Already? So fast! What do I call you, da-ge?”

“You-gongzi can just call me Wang Gou-er,” the centurion replied. “Lord Tang personally instructed us to come—”

“Wang-da-ge can just call me You Miao,” You Miao quickly interjected. “Come, come. Invite the guys in.”

Centurion Wang had intended to get to work as soon as they arrived, but You Miao kept telling them to eat first, that it was better to labor on a full stomach, and forcibly dragged the band of soldiers into Shen Garden. Back when Sunshower Tea Estate underwent renovations, You Miao had seen his own father generously offer the craftsmen meals—work came easier after an opening feast, and a special dinner had to be prepared for the end of the project as well.

Centurion Wang also had his men bring ten days’ worth of food supplies, but You Miao would have none of it. He ordered the stoves to be stoked and the two pigs chopped for braising. When Da-Liang came around, the sight of this scene had him laughing immediately.

“Ho, is shaoye about to benefit the next ten thousand generations? What a grand setup. Do we get a bite too?”

“Yes, of course,” You Miao replied. “If you’re idling either way, then come help!”

And so, the soldiers got down to help with the cooking. Meanwhile, You Miao led Centurion Wang with him to the cellar to retrieve wine.

“Have some good wine; it’ll warm you up.”

You Miao took out ten jugs of Champion Reds and divided the drink among the soldiers. He got men to bring the tables out to the yard, and when there weren’t enough, he sent for long benches to be borrowed from Li Zhuang’s and other houses. It was like a festival, and the soldiers feasted on meat and wine, filling their stomachs to the brim.

When the jugs of Champion Red were opened, the thick, ambrosial smell of wine shocked the soldiers into loud cheers. They were all brutes anyway, and so uncaring of all else, they hollered and hooted on the spot as they downed the wine amidst drinking games. Eat first; the rest came after.

Once lunch had been concluded, the tipsy soldiers picked up their hoes and shovels and set off in the afternoon to go dig You Miao’s canal, and they didn’t return until the sun set in the west. You Miao had Li Zhuang and Zhu Tang’s wives come over to cook. After the soldiers had collected their meals, they didn’t need to build camp; each found a random spot in one of Shen Garden’s rundown rooms and laid out as they were.

At night, You Miao studied and scribbled under the lamplight to the sound of snoring outside. Even You Miao was a little amazed that Shen Garden managed to house a hundred people—more incredible was that the courtyard wasn’t even at full capacity. It wasn’t hard to imagine the scale of this place in its prime.

The Yang Prefectural Army’s arrival to build a canal startled the people of both Anlu and Guozhuang, especially those of Anlu. You Miao had become a familiar face in the village after his many purchases, so quite a number of people went to the estate to check things out. After all, this canal was going to drain into the sunken ground that was the great lake, and once the lake was filled, the water would flow down to Anlu Village via the small creek.

By that fact alone, what You Miao was doing was benefiting the livelihood of the entire Jiangnan region. Thus, Anlu's Village Chief sent forty live chickens and two hundred pounds of eggs to the estate as a show of gratitude. You Miao accepted all of it without qualms, and planned to add them as extras to the soldiers' fare at New Year's.

Riverwave Estate was suddenly bustling with voices, as its population had increased by no small amount. There were people everywhere, going in and out. When they encountered You Miao, they would all nod and greet him, and You Miao finally started to feel that, man, it was really great having so many people around. No wonder when people prayed to deities, they would light incense in abundance to ask for sons and daughters.

The water canal was almost halfway done within five days; it would probably only take another five days to reach the lake. The canal was carefully and neatly built, and Centurion Wang boasted to You Miao, "Did you know that the moat surrounding Yang Prefectural City was dug by these guys? After this canal is done, I guarantee you can use it for two hundred years."

Over the past few days, You Miao had grown familiar with the soldiers, fooling around and joking with them. They might be brutes, but brutes had their own fun. With his arm draped over the other's shoulders in comradely familiarity, You Miao punched Centurion Wang on the shoulder.

"Who knows what it'll look like in two hundred years, but it'll cover seventy, eighty years at least."

Centurion Wang laughed, his smile grand on his face. "In fifty years, if da-ge is still alive, then come find me if the canal breaks. Even if I have to crawl on my old bones, I'll come build you a new canal."

As You Miao stood by the canal watching over the work, someone from Shen Garden came to announce that a guest had arrived. And so, You Miao had Li Zhifeng stay and supervise while he went straight back.

When You Miao saw a horse carriage from Sunshower Tea Estate at the entrance of the manor, his stomach dropped. He thought, *Heh, has the old man finally remembered me?*

It had been almost a month since he'd left Sunshower Tea Estate, and You Miao had about sixty or seventy silver left. He had just been contemplating when he would sell off some of the valuables in Shen Garden—either some of the remaining paintings and calligraphy, or the hidden wine in the cellar, or the large trunks of fox pelts he had brought back from the border… Why was the old man here? Was it to give him money?

You Miao was kind of reluctant to see him. After crossing the second entrance, he saw that the person standing by the spirit screen was instead You Hange. You Dechuan hadn't come.

You Miao's long face relaxed somewhat, and he asked, "What are you doing here?"

You Hange was studying the words engraved on the spirit screen, and he smiled when he spotted You Miao. "Why are there suddenly so many soldiers in your house?"

"A friend sent them to help me build a canal, and they're using the opportunity to conduct winter training," You Miao replied. "How's studying going?"

"I can recognize some words now, following the guidance of my teacher… This is the word for heart, and this is…the word for spring." You Hange said, pointing at the wall.

"Heartbreaking be the evergreen waters under the bridge, wherein I once saw her beautiful figure reflected," You Miao finished for him, impatient. "Come on in."

You Hange smiled. "Nice poem. A few days ago, Dad heard that the Consulting Commandant of Yang Prefecture's Department of Military Defense came by. He didn't bring you any trouble, did he?"

"Nothing of the sort," You Miao answered absentmindedly as he led You Hange to the main hall.

The doors were already painted, as was the furniture, and they now radiated the stately opulence of antiques. Under the master's chair was a tiger skin rug, and the mounted heads of a buck and doe hung on each side of the wall. It was an exceptionally lofty room.

You Hange sat on one of the side chairs. You Miao called "Li Zhifeng!" but quickly realized he wasn't around, so he had to get up himself to retrieve the tea.

"Dad told me to bring some servants over so you're not short on waiting staff," You Hange continued. "I was afraid that you had already bought new servants, so I didn't bring anyone. I'll assign them as soon as I get home and have them come."

"No need." You Miao grew annoyed as soon as he heard You Hange's suggestion. "Even if they come, they won't be agreeable to use. They'd just be an eyesore."

"Why didn't you already buy a few, then?" You Hange asked.

"No money," You Miao laughed derisively.

You Hange hummed. "Have you spent all the money from before? Though I suppose it's true that you need to rebuild this estate. A bunch of places need money to fix up."

He reached for his money pouch as he spoke, and You Miao cut in.

"I'm joking with you. I just can't be bothered to buy servants. I'm the only one here, so why do I need so many servants to wait on me? There's no point to it."

"I know your expenses are huge…" You Hange said with a smile, taking out a small cloth pouch. "Gege hasn't been able to save much, and it really wasn't Dad who told me to give you money…"

Seeing him like this, You Miao now felt like he was the one acting unfairly. "What are you doing? I'm not a beggar, put that away."

But You Hange was insistent, and that made You Miao a little angry—it felt like he was giving him money out of pity.

Once more You Miao repeated, sounding firm, "Put it away. I really don't need it."

Thus, You Hange had to put the pouch away.

You Miao eyed him appraisingly, and all of a sudden, he felt a bit of pity for him. He could tell when someone was being genuinely kind to him, and the money You Hange had given him when he was leaving Sunshower Tea Estate had likely been all his savings from the past two years.

If it wasn't for his father's affair…if You Hange had been an older cousin…You Miao would've treated him really well and taken him for his own brother. Or if You Hange had moved into the house as a common son—sure, You Miao would've been reluctant at first, but he would've still taken care of him.

What was annoying was the dirty way You Dechuan had handled the matter, which made You Miao want to gag every time he saw You Hange—even when the man himself was innocent.

"Let me make you a cup of tea," You Miao said offhandedly, opening the tea jar and spooning for leaves.

Da-Liang saw from outside the door and said with a smile, "You-shaoye, can us hard workers also request a cup of tea?"

"Yeah, take a break. Come in and take a seat," You Miao said.

"Oh, we don't wanna dirty the place," Da-Liang said quickly. "Just pour us a sip. Tea's always been bitter for me, but I ain't ever tasted the kind that rich folks drank."

"Heh. Rich folks."

You Miao quirked his lips, but it was hard to tell if he was making a joke or laughing at himself, and You Hange was left feeling a little awkward. Fortunately, You Miao didn't make any further snide remarks. He wriggled his brows as he shook the leaves apart.

"You know, the current Third Prince once asked me to brew tea for him, but I rejected him."

You Hange watched You Miao move as he warmed the cups, stirred the leaves, sprinkled them into the hot water. His movements were fluid as rolling clouds and flowing water. It was indescribably beautiful, and when

performed by a young man, it was clean and frank and exuded masculine charm rather than a Jiangnan maiden's coy feminine elegance.

You Miao held up the long-spouted kettle and flicked his wrist with carefree grace, and scalding water streamed down like a swimming dragon in a beautiful arch as it entered the teapot, swirling and mixing the leaves as it went.

"I learned a poem a few days ago," You Hange said.

"Which one?" You Miao looked up and asked.

"Something, something, the affectionate wind rolls in tides from ten thousand miles far, then heartless, it sends the tide away…" You Hange recited. "What's the title, again?"

You Miao quirked his lips. "It's a lyric called 'Eight Beats of Ganzhou Song,' by Su Shi.[65]"

"Yes, that's it. Your hands roll like the tide when you make tea. It's really beautiful," You Hange complimented.

"Mhmm, good eyes. You can recognize my technique from learning a couple verses," You Miao replied mildly. "A tea ceremony has Three Criteria and Three Non-Criteria, Thirteen Properties, and Seven Taboos.[66] There are seventy-two schools altogether in the art of tea. Among them are the Hai, Xizi, Ganzhou, Chuan, Hantan, Wulishanyun…and others. The precise technique I'm using is 'The Coming and Going of Tide' from the Hai School."

You Miao used his thumb, index, and middle finger to lift the teacup by the rim, then he pressed the index and middle fingers of the other hand together to cushion the bottom of the cup. You Hange reached out to take the tea, but You Miao placed the cup on the corner table instead.

"Brew tea like this, and the scent itself can be extracted by the hot water," You Miao explained. And when You Hange picked up the teacup, he added, "Use an index finger to cushion the bottom, and two fingers from the other hand to steady the rim. Don't let your fingers touch the scalding sides of the cup."

You Hange smiled, a little embarrassed, and shook his head. “Dad never taught me tea-tasting.”

Da-Liang laughed. “This your gege, lad?” When You Miao made a noise of affirmation, he added, “Your noses are so similar; both the noses and the ears. You’ve got good-looking noses, a look of fortune and wealth. People gotta depend on good noses—good nose, good fate!”

You Miao didn’t comment, and instead cast a glance at You Hange. “Liang-shifu, your bowl.”

Da-Liang brought his bowl over and You Miao filled it.

“Good tea, good tea,” Da-Liang said as walked out with his tea.

You Miao poured himself a cup and took a sip, gazing out the door thoughtfully. His demeanor had relaxed more, and his expression no longer displayed any open or subtle mockery of his brother. After Craftsman Liang had said as such, You Miao discovered that he and You Hange really did resemble each other. Although he took more after his mom, his father had still left a mark in both their lives. Regardless of You Miao’s attitude toward his elder brother, they were both sons of the You family, and outsiders would also recognize them as such.

“This cup is so pretty,” You Hange said, sounding astonished. “It’s the like fish at the bottom are moving.”

“The water is the mother, the pot is the father, and each produces six cups of tea,” You Miao replied. “The fish in each cup is different. This was my mom’s dowry. Ruyao[67] only produced two sets; one set shattered, and the other became part of my mom’s dowry. And now it’s in my hands.”

“When I go back, I’ll have to learn more words. That way, I’ll be able to read books. Dad said I don’t understand tea, so he didn’t teach me much. After you left, Dad often sits by himself in the tearoom; not even mom or I are allowed to go in.”

What You Hange said made You Miao think of something else, however. He said almost to himself, “I should set up a tearoom too, and hang up a framed copy of ‘The Classic of Tea’ by Lu Yu.[68] It’d be elegant, and can fool people…”

You Hange started to laugh. “Dad wants you to come home for the thirtieth, eh. How about I come pick you up in a few days?”

“Nah, I’m too busy. Can’t get away.”

You Miao of course knew what You Dechuan was thinking, but the thought of having a New Year’s Eve reunion feast with Madam Wang made You Miao’s stomach churn.

“We have to pay respects to the ancestors on the thirtieth, did you forget?” You Hange added.

You Miao did indeed forget until now. He could disregard everything else, but paying respects to the ancestors was a mandatory ritual. You Dechuan might have offended him, but the ancestors certainly hadn’t; he couldn’t just forget them like that. You Dechuan was betting on You Miao going home.

But You Miao was also quick-witted, and he had another trick up his sleeve.

“I plan on going to Yang Prefecture on the thirtieth to buy some stuff,” You Miao said nonchalantly. “I’ll go back to the clan and have the year-end feast with the elders. I’ll pay respects to the ancestors there. Come, gege, have another cup.”

You Miao set down a second cup in front of You Hange while flashing a sly smile. You Hange was instantly at a loss for words.

Finally, You Hange said, “Why don’t you come home anyway, just for a bit? Even if you don’t come home for New Year’s, still…find some time to come visit Dad, please. Take this as gege begging you.”

“Then I’ll go back on the fifteenth,[69]” You Miao said disinterestedly. “Either way, I’m busy here.”

You Hange could only nod. He then asked after the situation at the estate, inquiring what You Miao planned to do for planting, if the wastelands had been reclaimed, what the water canal was for, and other such things. You Miao lazily answered only what he wanted to, and after noon had passed, You Hange rose to his feet to head home. You Miao didn’t try to keep him

for dinner, lest You Hange find out how poor You Miao was by the crude meal—for which Madam Wang would surely make fun of him when You Hange told her. Thus, You Hange was sent off.

The year was ending, and the temperature was dropping. Slowly but surely, Shen Garden was being repaired and looking increasingly stately. You Miao's only thought was that the money had been well-spent; perhaps he may have even paid too little. Da-Liang had renovated the entire yard using everything he ought to have, all the pillars had been repainted. Every time You Miao returned home, it almost felt like he didn't recognize his own house.

Every fretwork panel on the windows and doors exuded an air of elegance and wealth. Every glass tile was brand-new, purchased with his own money and freshly hauled back from Guozhuang Village. They were installed neatly on the pale walls outside, which had been washed with lye water.

It had taken quite an effort to tidy up such a large property. The soldiers had also helped cultivate the soil in the garden, clean out the rockeries, and built support stacks for the wisterias. When spring came, the yard would cascade with wisterias like a waterfall.

The large pond in the garden had also been dredged, and was ready to be injected with fresh water. The original pondwater had been drawn from the dried lake on which Zhu Tang had been sitting at the edge. The brimming pond used to attract songbirds; it had been a wonderous sight. However, the lake out there was still dry for the moment, so the pond wasn't much to look at either.

You Miao planned on installing a long bamboo pipe to draw some water from the canal to inject into the pond that would wrap around the long corridors of the garden, then he'd build a tiny little bamboo waterwheel. The bamboo pipe dripping bit by bit into the waterwheel would add a unique charm to the whole ensemble.

On the evening of the twenty-ninth, You Miao packed a grant of two hundred coins for Da-Liang and Xiao-Liang and gifted the two a jug of

wine. The money paid for their work was *so* well spent; the tranquil Shen Garden of a hundred years ago had been almost restored. You Miao also hosted a feast for the soldiers that night, considering it their New Year's celebration.

It was the thirtieth the next day, and no one had to work, so the band of soldiers sat in the yard of Shen Garden sipping on wine while they did some friendly gambling, playing games of coin toss and dice. Before the day had broken, You Miao and Li Zhifeng had already crossed the Yangtze River and were headed for Jiang Prefectural City. They brought with them half a trunk of animal skins to go greet the You Clan.

The You family was a large clan that spanned both Liu and Yang Prefectures, but You Dechuan was closer with the branches in Liu Prefecture. After the recent events, You Miao found out why: the granduncles of Yang Prefecture had been vehemently against You Dechuan changing the eldest principal son. You Dechuan had to call for a clan gathering in Yang Prefecture, and the Liu Prefecture side of the family had sent a number of clan elders to help speak for You Dechuan. In the end, the family in Yang Prefecture had little choice but to settle and make You Dechuan swear that he would never strip You Miao's right to inheritance.

Not forgetting the affection the granduncles had shown him, You Miao personally went to call on the family. He gifted the houses the pelts and chatted with his uncles and cousins. This side of the family certainly was thriving; there were twelve houses and each ran their own businesses. As You Miao clinked wine cups with broad smiles, the subject returned to Riverwave Estate again.

"Didn't I say our boy isn't one to fool around and do nothing but wait to die? Look at him now! Y'all look!" one of the uncles piped up.

The uncles all laughed. You Miao was clever and knew exactly how to butter people up, and thus had always been a favorite among the elders since he was young. Even his cousins loved him.

"There's no one to farm the land yet," You Miao said. "Ugh. I'll have to think of something when spring comes."

A cousin spoke up. “Isn’t that easy? Just go to the Yang Prefectural Office and give a shout to the Deputy County Magistrate, and tell him to send people looking for work over to your estate. Or you can go to that little uncle of yours at Shaoyuan Estate. What’s his name again?”

“Qiao Jue,” someone answered.

The crowd all nodded, and the cousin continued, “Qiao Jue is super good with people; his bargaining skills are top notch. Go to him; he’ll definitely take you to the markets. There are plenty of people selling themselves for a bite to eat, so you can just spend a bit of money to buy some of them. That’s also where you go to recruit permanent labor and tenants, so just do it. It ain’t hard finding people, what’s hard is finding the food supplies to feed all those mouths!”

You Miao nodded. Another uncle spoke up unhurriedly.

“Since you’ve come into the world, you’ll have to establish yourself and hit it big to show your dad. I also know Miao-zi isn’t stupid.”

“Help me write a letter, Er-Bo,” You Miao said. “I’ll go knock on the Yang Prefectural Office’s door.”

“Of course,” the uncle replied. “After New Year’s is over, I’ll send a letter directly to the Yang Prefectural Office, so don’t you worry a thing.”

You Miao relaxed at last, then started to inquire after the current market. Half the You Clan in Yang Prefecture were landowners, while the other half did business. The ancestors had passed down over six hundred acres of land for growing tea, mulberries, silkworms, castor beans, and plums… Some of the clansmen presided over the fertile lands and hired farmers to work the fields, and others who were more quick-witted sold the produce.

The You Clan’s green plum wine was famous across Jiangnan, and this fine brew also made part of the imperial tribute. There was even less need to talk of the Yang Prefecture’s embroidery work.

As for the You family in Liu Prefecture, where You Dechuan originated, they owned over twenty acres of salt fields and the sale of salt was their main business. They also distributed seafood and sold retail imported

marine goods, such as corals, pearls, seashells, agarwood, and other such things.

You Miao only wanted to know what was profitable, and having asked around, the cousins all told him that anything was profitable these days if you knew how to do business.

"But I still gotta pick something, don't I?" You Miao said.

"Tea plantations make money," joked the uncle You Miao had always gotten along with when he was little. "Look at your dad: one tael of tea for one tael of gold. Is top-grade Biluochun[70] not profitable? Or Junshan Silver Mist,[71] two taels of silver for a tael of leaves…"

One of the younger uncles chimed in. "If Miao-zi wants to grow tea, why bother with his dad? Go find Shaoyuan Tea Estate."

"No good," someone said. "Shaoyuan Tea Estate has good tea saplings, but they've been having trouble selling their stock. These past few years…" He trailed off with a sigh.

The others signaled for him not to go overboard, since at the end of the day, this was You Miao's mother's family they were discussing. But the idea did click with You Miao. He certainly could ask his maternal uncles for some tea saplings to grow on his estate—wasn't the land on the Jiangbei side perfect for planting trees?

"Growing mulberries could work, too," one of the uncles said. "Ten years ago, silk was expensive, so a number of landowners cut down their fruit trees and planted mulberry trees[72] instead. But the market price for silk crashed a few years ago and they all lost their investments, and they cut all the mulberry trees down to plant tea trees. Thinking about it now, the price of silk should be inflating again in the next few years."

This was reliable information, and You Miao asked, "What about oil?"

"Rapeseed," someone said. "That might work. But it's all foggy at night here in Yang Prefecture, and it's not easy to grow with the rainy season here."

“Oil has been expensive these past few years as well,” the uncle said. “Miao-zi, why don’t you grow some rapeseed? I’ll collect it from you, and we can split twenty-eighty on profit.”

“Done,” You Miao agreed readily. “It’s near springtime now, so the seeds will need to be sown come the second month. I’ll hire some temp laborers and have that planted before I flatten more land and think about what else to plant.”

Another cousin piped up. “Keep some bees, too. You can make rapeseed salad with honey.”

You Miao really had to hand it to these uncles and cousins, and he laughed. “Okay, okay, after the fifteenth, I’ll go buy the seeds.”

“Let me point you to a place,” the same cousin said. “If you go past Liu Prefecture and head toward Cang Prefecture, there are many who grow legumes there. Don’t ask questions, just go straight to Yibao County in Cang Prefecture and pretend to be a Liu Prefecture comprador there to buy rapeseed seeds. Be sure to pick the plump, unroasted ones. Buy two thousand pounds of them and dry them under the sun yourself. After that, soak the seeds in a solution that’s ten percent urine and ninety percent water, then filter out and sow the seeds.”

You Miao nodded along to the instructions, recalling that the same method was also mentioned in “*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*.” He then asked, “Where do I find the beekeepers?”

“They’re everywhere,” an uncle answered. “Go take a walk in the hills blooming with camellias. There’s a bunch of beekeepers there, worried that there aren’t enough flowers. You can grab a couple of them. If you’ve got flowers all year round, then it’s good to keep them around your manor too. Not for profit reasons, but it’s nice to always have honey to drink.”

“Done. I’ll send someone to find them for me when the time comes,” You Miao said.

After respects were paid to the ancestors and the reunion feast was over, the clansmen tried to keep You Miao for the night. With his mind still on his home, You Miao quickly declined.

“No, no, it’s okay.”

When he exited the manor, the driver was tethering the carriage onto the horses. You Miao looked around and asked, “Where’s Li Zhifeng?”

A boy servant responded, “To answer shaoye, that servant said that he was going out after he finished dinner. I haven’t seen him come back since.”

You Miao waited by the door for a while, and snow started to flurry. This was the coldest time of year, and it had finally snowed in Jiangnan. Who knows what kind of winter wonderland would await them the next day? He kind of wanted to go home, but also to stroll around Yang Prefecture with Li Zhifeng. He waited for a long time, and stamped his cold feet around with the cousins who were with him.

One of the cousins teased, “Heh, everyone else has servants who wait for their young master, but look at you, waiting for your servant.”

The cousins all started to laugh, and You Miao scoffed. “You guys don’t understand, Li Zhifeng and I are like brothers. Don’t call him servant this, servant that. He’s not the same as your boy servants.”

“You’re not keeping him in your room, are you?” a cousin teased You Miao, squishing him in his arms and squeezing his face.

“Look at him. Maybe *he’s* the one being kept in the room by the servant!” another cousin teased, making everyone laugh boisterously.

“If it wasn’t for Li Zhifeng, who knows where I’d be right now,” You Miao said sternly. Didn’t you all see how my dad randomly dumped an older brother on me at Sunshower Tea Estate; some guy I’ve never met? Li Zhifeng is my real brother, he’s genuinely good to me…” He trailed off when he saw Li Zhifeng come around the corner of the street, feeling a little embarrassed. “Where have you been?”

Li Zhifeng handed him a paper package. “Went to buy you something fun.”

“M’kay. Let’s go,” You Miao said.

Now the cousins were hooting harder with laughter.

“It’s like he’s talking to his little wife.”

“Yeah, what a happy couple.”

Someone laughingly scolded Li Zhifeng, “Who says you can address your young master so directly with ‘you’ instead of ‘shaoye’? Miao-zi, you gotta discipline him properly when you get home.”

Li Zhifeng’s face turned red, and he stood there in the powdering snow, watching You Miao with a smile on his face.

“He’s never known how to talk properly. It’s fine as long as I know he’s good to me, so leave him alone,” You Miao said. “We’re off. Come visit me at the estate when you’ve all got the time.”

“Of course, of course.”

The cousins bade their farewells, and someone added, “Since we’re all family, you can’t scorn your geges anyway.”

“Who’s scorning who?!” You Miao laughed and mounted the carriage, waving the crowd goodbye as they departed Yang Prefectural City.

The clansmen were still extremely good to him. His father always used to say that the state of the world was fickle, as were human relationships, and You Miao’s ears almost fell off from how often he heard the phrase repeated. You Miao also used to think it was true, but as he grew up, he gradually realized that maybe You Dechuan hadn’t been so right after all. His cousins and uncles were all reasonable people, and everyone was living well. When the family called on each other, it wasn’t to borrow money, and it wasn’t to make trouble for anyone; what was so bad about doing some business together and building give-and-take relationships?

You Dechuan had been overly promiscuous when he was younger, and had spent gold like dirt; being scorned by the clan was entirely his own fault.

The wind outside was blustery. It was the coldest time of the year, and although it was flurrying, this was still fairly good weather compared to the capital. Who knows what sort of heavy snows the capital had gotten by now. Shrunken into Li Zhifeng’s embrace, You Miao only wanted to nuzzle

and knead into him. Li Zhifeng, on the other hand, opened the wool throw blanket and wrapped You Miao with it.

Li Zhifeng whispered into You Miao's ear, his hand interlocked with You Miao's, "Sleepy?"

"No." You Miao was too lazy to even lift his eyelids. "Hold me tighter."

Li Zhifeng hugged him close and brushed his lips over You Miao's brows, pressing small kisses to his eyes. You Miao felt nothing but warmth and comfort.

With eyes still closed, he asked, "You bought me something fun?"

"You'll see when we get back," Li Zhifeng whispered into his ears.

It was midnight by the time they returned to Shen Garden. The soldiers were still drinking and playing games, joking around and making merry. The large garden was lined with red lanterns and bustling with happy voices. There were even some who were hollering at the top of their lungs, telling stories. It was a joyous and cheerful atmosphere.

Li Zhifeng opened the paper package outside the main gate—it was a big, long firecracker. You Miao squealed in delight and immediately went to find a bamboo stick.

"Hang on. There's this too," Li Zhifeng said with a chuckle, then rummaged out a tiger hat from his waist bag. He flipped it back and forth in his hands before putting it on You Miao.

You Miao immediately yelled, "First cracker of the new year—!"

The soldiers all rushed over, and using the bamboo stick, You Miao raised the three-yard-long firecracker, and Li Zhifeng lit the wick. The firecracker crackled and boomed, shaking the earth and blasting to the heavens.

CHAPTER 15

One the first day of the new year, You Miao opened the door to a thick blanket of firecracker scraps on the ground. The soldiers were doing whatever they wanted, and You Miao left them alone to fool around however they pleased. A bunch of them had crossed the river first thing in the morning to go hunting in the hills of Jiangbei, and had brought back quite the haul of pheasants and wild hares. You Miao, for his part, tried joining their excursion, but it hadn't been for very long before his eyes drooped, so he came home early to keep snoozing.

All four tenant houses came to visit Shen Garden at the start of the year to offer their New Year's greetings, and each of them was given a grant. Starting that day, Zhang Er also frequented the study, and so a brazier was added to the room. They each had a book in hand: You Miao was flipping through "*Divine Farmer Shennong*," Zhang Er was studying the "*Classic of Rites,*[73]" and Li Zhifeng was reading "*The Art of War*" with great fascination. It was snowing lightly outside, while the study was warm and cozy and overall very comfortable.

On the second day of the new year, the Yang Prefecture Army's soldiers were finally done goofing off. Each hauling their own tools, they returned to the digging the canal. It would probably be done in another four or five days, and once the canal was connected, the waterwheel built, and the paddy field ridges erected, the water would flow from the river through the entire Riverwave Estate, crisscrossing like a spiderweb until finally it merged into the lake in the south, filling it before continuing onward toward Anlu Village.

You Miao circled several plots of land on the map. Rice was a must—with such a huge estate, it'd be nonsensical to buy rice and flour elsewhere. Riverwave Estate had two hundred acres of fertile land in all, one hundred and forty of which were south of the river. If he used the east half of that to

grow rice, assuming the yield per one thousand square feet was three hundred pounds, then that would be a yield of nine hundred pounds with three growing seasons per year. Which meant a total yield of three million pounds, or—fifty-one thousand bushels.

In Jiangnan, two bushels of rice went for one silver. In other words, twenty-five thousand silver per year! Every one thousand square feet translated to seven silver and five coins!

You Miao was bug-eyed, and his fingers shook so much that he nearly dropped his abacus. Li Zhifeng and Zhang Er both looked over in confusion.

"Just having a seizure," You Miao said. "Don't mind me."

Li Zhifeng chuckled and reached over to wrap an arm around You Miao, continuing to read his book while You Miao click-clacked away on his abacus in his embrace.

Of course, the twenty-five thousand silver wouldn't all be his; he'd lowered the rent by ten percent for the current tenants, but any new tenants or full-time laborers would, of course, not be getting that rate. They would be charged at least fifty percent for the lease. Of the twelve thousand five hundred silver, he would also need to deduct property tax—one coin per one thousand square feet of vacant land, five coins per one thousand square feet of farmed land—which would be at least forty-five hundred silver, and that would leave him eight thousand silver in profit.

As long as he could lease out all the paddy fields, he wouldn't have to worry about starving to death, and there was eight thousand silver per year of pure profit on top of that. You Miao used to consistently hear about how hard it was to farm Riverwave Estate's land—and it certainly was, what with there being no water, no fertilizer, and no farmers. Without water, the rice would have trouble growing, and since the lake was dried up, watering the crops counted on the mood of the heavens.

But once the construction of the waterwheel was completed, there would be an unlimited supply of water from the river for irrigation. Forget growing rice for two seasons a year; three seasons would be a walk in the park—and that meant three times the yield. You Dechuan didn't grow crops,

so naturally he didn't care about tilling equipment like plows, double-row harrows, spades, and such.

You Miao set "*Divine Farmer Shennong*" down and said, "Zhang Er, throw me '*Mohist Classics'* from the shelf."

A book flew over, pages flapping. Li Zhifeng caught it in the air and passed it to You Miao, who began to flip through it studiously.

In these recent days, You Miao had roughly grasped the major planting methods used since ancient times. "*Treatise of Gongshu*" was a compilation of master craftsman Lu Ban's works. It included descriptions of all sorts of elaborate devices, such as waterwheels, bamboo pipes, and wooden surveillance kites. It covered everything from small playthings, like copper or iron figurines, to structural renovations and building constructions. Carpentry and metalworking were certainly useful subjects, but there wasn't much relation to agriculture.

"*Mohist Classics*" was written by Mozi, the founder of the Mohist school of thought. It was a treatise on machines and mechanisms, divided into a section on military implements and another on agricultural ones. The military section was dedicated to ballista, moat excavators, and even things like scaling ladders, catapults, and trap-sprung crossbows for siege warfare. You Miao had no need for these, so he set it aside for now. The agriculture section, however, was full of useful information, including three-row plows, heavy plows, seeders, double-row harrows, spades, weeders, stream-spitting trenches, copper scarecrows, and other such things. With equipment made according to the teachings of this book, paired with the grindstones, winnowing baskets, sieves, and other such tools described in "*Exploitations of the Works of Nature*," one household and two oxen could easily handle up to over an acre of land.

"*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*," meanwhile, listed the characteristics of all kinds of crops, including information on the appropriate fertilizers to use in each region, be it wood ash or livestock urine, as well as important techniques such as threshing and seed selection. And then there was "*Divine Farmer Shennong*," which catalogued plant species and their uses.

All of these books, without exception, came with his mother's annotations. It would seem that his mom also once wanted to fix up this estate, and had set aside a couple plots of land to plant some things for fun. There were also corresponding analyses, which included notes that no matter the soil quality or yield of the harvest or the market price of grain, one of the crops grown *must* be rice so as to prevent famine.

Qiao Ke-er had then gone on to write about the plague that had swept through Jiangnan when she was young. The plague had left a very deep impression on her—there had been corpses strewn everywhere in the wilderness, people had traded their children for a bite to eat, and even those who had the money couldn't find any rice or flour to buy. This was why setting aside grain for storage was a must, regardless of a good or bad harvest.

For all the books that he'd poured over, You Miao also believed that rice was the safest bet—everyone needed to eat, no matter the year. Even if rice and flour didn't sell, it was equally good to have them stashed in the granary.

You Miao circled the area he planned to grow rice and wrote "eight thousand silver" over it. The higher elevated lands to the east would be slated for rice, with sowing scheduled to start once spring arrived and the waterwheel was complete. As for the low-lying land that stretched from the east of the estate to the lake, where the soil was loose, that area might be a good candidate for rapeseed. And once they found some beekeepers, they could maybe build a row of beehives next to the lake. That way, whenever they stepped outside the manor, they would be greeted by the delightful sight of lush green rapeseed fields.

"How much is oil going for right now?" You Miao asked.

Zhang Er glanced up at him and answered, "Fifty-eight coins per pound."

"Fifty-five to sixty-five," Li Zhifeng absentmindedly replied.

You Miao nodded, then asked, "How much oil does one thousand square feet of rapeseed produce?"

Neither Zhang Er nor Li Zhifeng knew the answer to that one, so You Miao went to look it up in "*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People*." It was written that one thousand square feet of land produced two hundred and fifty pounds of rapeseed, and one hundred pounds of oil could be extracted thereof. So that would be five silver per one thousand square feet. With honey added on, it would be about the same as growing rice—maybe slightly more profitable, but not by much.

With a flick of his wrist, You Miao happily circled another ten acres of land for rapeseed.

Someone was shouting outside just then. They seemed to be calling for You Miao, though the words were indistinct.

"Boyo!" called the voice of a man. "You home? I've come to visit!"

You Miao jumped up like he'd been stung and hastily went to grab for his boots. He tried to put them on but couldn't, so he gave up and ran out barefoot.

There was a man in the courtyard looking around, and he commented, "Such a grand manor, but not a single maid?"

"Xiao-jiu[74]—!" You Miao cried happily as he ran down the corridors and threw himself into the man's arms, rolling and nuzzling like crazy.

The man was his uncle on his mother's side, Qiao Jue. He pulled You Miao into a big hug, then pressed him against the wall and ruffled his hair.

"You little brat! You really weren't gonna visit your mom's side of the family unless your little uncle came to see you first, huh?!"

You Miao was both laughing and crying at the sight of Qiao Jue. He dragged him inside the main hall, pushed him down on the long divan, and immediately burrowed into his arms, burying his face into his chest before going silent for a long while.

"All right, all right." Qiao Jue chuckled helplessly as he patted You Miao's back, trying to get him up. You Miao's eyes were red-rimmed when he pulled back, and his uncle teased, "I was just about to say that you got taller, but you're still sniveling like a little kid."

You Miao sniffled. Li Zhifeng came over with his boots and put them on him.

You Miao went to the inner room to fetch tea, and asked as he went, "What're you doing here?"

"Coming to see you, of course," Qiao Jue said. "I've just about had it at your second uncle's place, so I was thinking about coming to live with you instead."

"I've got nothing but rooms here, pick whichever one you like," You Miao said, laughing through his tears as he stood on tiptoe to retrieve a tea set and a box of leaves from high up.

Qiao Jue looked around appreciatively. "So this is the estate my sis bought back then? Not bad." Then he turned and nodded at Li Zhifeng. "You don't have to wait on us, go ahead and do what you need to do. I'm his little uncle, just treat me like family."

So, who was this Qiao Jue? He was originally the second master of Shaoyuan Tea Estate. Qiao Ke-er's parents had had four children. The eldest daughter and her husband died in the plague that swept through Jiangnan, leaving behind a daughter named Qiao Sheng. The eldest principal son, Qiao Zhang, took over the estate after the parents had passed, and married a well-known local lady by the name of Bai. The third daughter, Qiao Ke-er, married You Dechuan—this was You Miao's mom.

The youngest son, Qiao Jue, had been born right as the estate fell into decline. When he was young, he looked like You Miao; as they say, nephews resemble their maternal uncles. Only five years older than You Miao, Qiao Jue was practically raised by Qiao Ke-er and had spent much of his childhood living at Sunshower Tea Estate. He and You Miao looked just like a pair of brothers—both delicate and pretty, but also handsome, and with an air of easy grace.

What was more coincidental was that after Qiao Jue's parents had passed away from the plague soon after he was born, the wet nurse that Qiao Ke-er had found him was old Nanny Sun, who would later become You Miao's wet nurse. According to Jiangnan's custom, those who suckled from the

same wet nurse should be good brothers, and ought to look after one another.

Thus, Qiao Jue and You Miao were uncle and nephew as well as childhood playmates. Naturally, they were very close. It went without saying that You Miao did want to go see Qiao Jue when he first left home and arrived at Riverwave Estate, but his uncle's was a place full of noise and talk, and his second uncle's wife, who was in charge of the household, wasn't exactly someone easy to get along with. He'd have needlessly caused annoyance if he had gone, so he decided to settle in first, get the estate cleaned up, and then invite Qiao Jue over.

Qiao Jue was a man of many talents as well—astronomy and mathematics, the Four Books and Five Classics,[75] divination and tea ceremony, you name it. In his days as a student, he had once debated his teacher into speechlessness. Nonetheless, he was unruly by nature and cared neither for composing scholarly essays nor for rank and achievement in the Imperial Exam. When You Miao left for the capital, Qiao Jue was doing accounting for Shaoyuan Tea Estate, and he'd spend his days running some casual numbers before running off to idle about.

You Miao took down a black-and-white porcelain teapot along with two cups, one black and one white. "I just so happen to have some Junshan Silver Mist."

"Hang on; I brought some tea for you to sample," Qiao Jue hurriedly said, taking out a packet of tea from his sleeve. "Here's some Dongding Oolong I kept from the year before last."

You Miao brewed the tea using the black-and-white set instead of his mom's dowry set.

"How are things back home?" You Miao asked.

Qiao Jue sighed heavily. "Same as always. The bickering is nonstop every day, while the business gets worse every year. If you ask me, we might as well close the tea shop and open a pawn shop instead. Every year after the harvest, that second uncle of yours… It'd be one thing if he just sold it all to the retailers at their price and cleared out his stock, but he

won't listen and insists on hanging onto the stock to sell at his own tea shop."

You Miao was well aware that part of the reason Shaoyuan Tea Estate's business was in dire straits was because his old man You Dechuan was a little *too* good at doing business. The competition for tea in the Jiangnan market these days was so fierce that the tea merchants were doing just about everything short of murder and arson; with that tiny brain of Qiao Zhang's, how could he possibly hope to fight with the rest of the tea merchants that were all in cahoots?

He had heard his mom and his second uncle's wife argue a few times when he was young. He hadn't understood then, but he more or less got it now.

"So they're all working together to force down the price of our family's tea, huh?" You Miao said. "Tell second uncle to just sell what he can."

"Your second uncle is a blockhead," Qiao Jue said with a huff. "Things wouldn't have gotten to this point if he was amenable to suggestions of any kind, but he acts like you're trying to do him ill if you say even a couple words extra."

You Miao laughed. "How's cousin?"

"Same old," Qiao Jue said. "She argues with that woman day in and day out, and has trouble marrying. As soon as your mom left and there was no one left at the estate to keep things in check, your second uncle's wife has been getting more and more overbearing. The pittance she gives for our stipends is like she's dismissing beggars or something."

"Why don't you just stay here? Don't even bother going back," You Miao offered.

Qiao Jue didn't answer, examining the cup instead. He said with a smile, "These cups are pretty interesting."

You Miao replied good-humoredly, "I bought the set in the capital. It's called a Taiji Pot, and was two silver from a streetside stall."

You Miao poured the tea into the Taiji cups and took a sip. The tea didn't taste like anything special at first, but after a bit of savoring, the aftertaste was mellow and sweet—like the grandness of mountains and rivers, with a touch of the fragrance of ink, suffusing the tongue layer by layer.

"Good tea," You Miao noted.

"Right?" Qiao Jue said. "I've told your second uncle about this tea a few times already, but he still insists on growing green tea instead of this one."

You Miao laughed. "Don't people here prefer green tea? If you want to deal in oolong tea, you'd have to go to places like the Hubei and Hunan regions to sell, or to the capital and Shuzhong."

"Apparently the lord officials in the north are fond of oolong," Qiao Jue said.

"Do you have the saplings?" You Miao asked.

"I have plenty, just nowhere to plant them."

"Forget about going home and contending with that woman," You Miao said. "Go gather your saplings and come plant them here. I mean it, xiao-jiu. I've missed you to death!"

Qiao Jue let out a sigh. You Miao actually had plans to pay Shaoyuan Tea Estate a visit in a couple days to acquire tea saplings. He definitely wouldn't win in the Jiangnan green tea market, not with his old man in the race, but he could always grow some oolong tea to sell in the capital.

"I'll have to go home and see first," Qiao Jue finally said.

You Miao knew Qiao Jue wouldn't ditch him; even if he ended up not moving in, he would definitely still send the saplings over, so You Miao wasn't worried at all. Three rounds of tea later, he took Qiao Jue out on a tour of the estate. Qiao Jue clicked his tongue appreciatively and the conversation turned toward You Miao's time in the capital, which You Miao smugly spilled—and told all about how the Third Prince Zhao Chao liked him and wanted him to be his study companion, and about what happened at home.

Qiao Jue was famous in Yang Prefecture for his looks, and with You Miao next to him, the uncle and nephew each exuded their own charm and handsomeness. The two trotted leisurely on horseback through the entire estate during the day, and in the evening, You Miao treated Qiao Jue to a farmer's dinner. Li Zhifeng made steamed fish while Li Zhuang and Zhu Tang's wives, who had come to help at the estate, made a pot of chicken soup, bacon stir-fry, sliced blood sausage, fried rice cakes, as well as seasonal vegetables and steamed eggs.

You Miao topped up Qiao Jue's wine cup nonstop as they feasted. "We just got settled in, so there's nothing too fancy in terms of food and drink," he said. "But do help yourself."

"It's fine, all good." Qiao Jue's face was wine-flushed as he spoke. "Food back at our estate is more or less the same stuff, anyway."

You Miao was surprised to hear that at first, and then pity welled up. His mother's side of the family had once been of means as well, how had they fallen so low?

"Is there not enough money coming in?" You Miao finally realized that things might actually be serious.

"To say the least!" Qiao Jue exclaimed. "This handed-down family business is lumbering and cumbersome. Sure, it worked fine twenty years ago, but doing the exact same thing in today's market is completely unfeasible. Back when third sis was still around, at least there was still eight or nine hundred silver coming in each year. But in recent years, your second uncle's been tearing down the east wall to patch the west; heaven knows how much debt is owed now. Debt slips every day, with no sign of any incoming revenue, *and* your uncle's wife keeps drawing money from the accounts to provide for her gaggle of relatives." Qiao Jue sighed heavily and finished the rant with, "Yeah, it's rough."

Qiao Jue was in charge of Shaoyuan Tea Estate's accounts and knew exactly how much was coming in and going out, whether money was being made or lost. If *he* was saying such things, then the business probably wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer.

"Come sit." You Miao tugged at Li Zhifeng.

Li Zhifeng hastily waved his hand. “I’ll eat outside.”

“Just sit,” Qiao Jue said with a smile. “My nephew already told me you’re like his best bro…”

You Miao immediately turned red and hurried to say, “Okay, that’s enough.”

Qiao Jue sighed again. “I heard about what happened to you. Xiao-jiu wanted to go have a talk with him, but…”

You Miao quirked his lips. “Don’t worry about it, life happens.”

Qiao Jue picked up his wine and clinked cups with You Miao. “Shaoyuan Tea Estate is standing only because of financial assistance from your dad; gifts blind the eyes, but that sister-in-law of mine won’t stop sucking up to You Dechuan, either… When I learned about what happened, I was mad.”

“My dad’s always been kind of an asshole, so he would’ve ignored you even if you had gone knocking,” You Miao said. “Seriously, don’t worry about it.”

They clinked cups again and each took a sip of the wine.

“But it’s the principle of the thing!” Qiao Jue said. “I cried when I first heard about it. It’s a good thing third sis bought this estate, or else I wouldn’t be able to sleep, thinking about how you’d have to put up with that evil woman.”

You Miao laughed. “There’s no point taking it out on them. I’m just going to carve out a good life for myself, with good food and good drinks. She wants me down in the dumps, well, I’ll do the exact opposite. I’m going to live my best life, and there’s no better revenge than that.”

“That’s the way,” Qiao Jue replied with a smile. “You’re much smarter than me. I let those crappy affairs at home get to me too much, and get all worked up over nothing.” He noticed Li Zhifeng standing off to the side, so he tapped his chopsticks against the wine bowl and said with a grin, “Come sit, Li Zhifeng. I’m already treating you as family, so you gotta extend me the same courtesy, yeah?”

Li Zhifeng nodded and took a seat at the table, joining the eating and drinking. That night, You Miao refused to let Qiao Jue go, and so the two shared a bed with You Miao hugging Qiao Jue around the waist. It was as if they had returned to the time when they were little, and they had endless things to say to each other.

Qiao Jue had been raised by Qiao Ke-er, and was proficient in everything from the Four Arts—zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting—to scholarship and etiquette. You Miao had always idolized his little uncle since he was young, and the two talked and talked until they fell asleep. When they woke up, they continued from where they left off, and talked some more. You Miao told him about the waterwheel he planned to build, and Qiao Jue volunteered the couple hundred silver he had put aside in savings over the last few years for the project.

They dozed on and off in each other's arms and ended up sleeping in until midday of the third. After lunch, Qiao Jue said he was heading back. You Miao wanted to keep him for longer, but Qiao Jue said he still had to stop by and inspect the tea estate and prepare for the spring sprout pickings, so You Miao had to reluctantly let him go.

On the fourth day of the new year, the canal was complete and was only waiting for the waterwheel installation. You Miao knew that if he wanted to plant trees in the lands to the north, he would first have to cut down a section of the basswood that grew there. Those trees had been planted there nearly a hundred years ago by the original owner of the estate, and whenever Guozhuang's villagers needed to make furniture, they would go to the northern hill for timber.

You Miao borrowed several dozen hatchets and asked the soldiers to cut down the trees for him and toss them into the river. On the other side of the river, Li Zhifeng lassoed the timber and pulled the wood to shore. Although there should now be enough money for the waterwheel, there was no harm in saving where possible and using materials from the estate itself—such as timber.

You Miao didn't have any plans to reclaim the land north of the river for paddy fields. The terrain there was uneven, and thus harder to cultivate than

the south. Any tillable land would have to be in the form of stepped fields, for which irrigation then became a problem. The river also cut right across the land, so it'd be too troublesome to go back and forth every day to tend to the fields. It would be far easier to simply plant tea and mulberry trees and turn the area into a woodland instead, which would also serve to shield against fierce winds and mudslides. There were more than forty acres of land there; twenty for tea and twenty for mulberries, and the rest for plum trees.

The soldiers of Yang Prefectural Army had more or less reclaimed all the wasteland south of the river for You Miao by now. A fire was also set to clear out the weeds, and smoke billowed out magnificently over the entire estate. By the seventh day of the year, everything was done. You Miao held another feast and fed everyone full to the brim before the soldiers were paid five strings of coins and sent off.

With everyone gone, leaving only You Miao and Li Zhifeng, Shen Garden returned to its former peace and quiet. Zhang Er still came over every day to read, and helped out with cleaning while he was there.

"Is there enough money?" Li Zhifeng asked, without prompt for once.

"There should be."

You Miao and Li Zhifeng were sitting by the riverbank, guarding their giant pile of basswood logs. They were at the large clearing by the lower reaches of the river, and the logs were piled neatly into ten stacks. The tenant farmers took turns watching over the timber at night with the puppy in tow, while You Miao himself hung around the place during the day, strolling along the riverside. Sometimes he'd space out, sometimes he'd read books, sometimes he'd pet the rocks or grill fish with Li Zhifeng.

The time he'd spent in the capital felt like another lifetime. The days living here in Jiangnan taking care of his own estate passed calmly and uneventfully; work at sunrise and rest at sunset. You Miao was feeling more and more like a farmer.

"Xiao-jiu said he could lend me some money," You Miao said. "When the old craftsman comes by in a couple days, I'll tally up all the costs and go find him then."

Money, money, money, everything needed money. He hadn't even gotten around to recruiting more tenant farmers yet, and so much money was already draining out of his pockets. He would have to wait until the canal was functional before hiring workers; he didn't know how many he could manage to recruit, but hopefully it would be a lot.

The whole year must be planned for in the spring, and the time to sow was fast approaching.

The markets at both Guozhuang and Anlu had reopened, and it was even livelier and more bustling over at Yang Prefectural City. You Miao wanted to go play but couldn't get away, stuck holding down the fort as he was. Just when his patience was wearing thin, someone finally hollered from above.

Zhu Tang was yelling down from the edge of the cliff at them. "Shaoye —!"

"What?!" You Miao looked up and shouted back.

Zhu Tang yelled something that You Miao couldn't catch, but Li Zhifeng's hearing was excellent, and he said, "Old man Huang is here, and he brought a bunch of people."

You Miao was thrilled. "Quick, let's head up right now."

"No rush, they're on their way here coming down along the road by the river," Li Zhifeng said.

You Miao was nervous while he waited. Less than an hour later, Da-Liang arrived carrying Old Craftsman Huang on his back, along with some thirty-odd tradespeople following after. You Miao was caught by surprise—*this* many people?! They were all experienced craftsmen, nothing like the soldiers from before, and heaven only knew how much it'd cost to hire them all. But since they had already come, You Miao had to go offer his greetings.

"How come you didn't go home for New Year's? Or go look around the markets?" Old Craftsman Huang asked.

“Couldn’t get away,” You Miao answered with a smile. “I would’ve felt uneasy wandering off with things unfinished.”

“I see.” Old Craftsman Huang sat down on a large rock by the river. With both hands on his cane, he said, “Once construction gets started in a couple of days, you’ll be free to go take a stroll elsewhere.”

You Miao asked a little nervously, “Sir, have you finished looking over the blueprint?”

“Come over here and take a look at the additions I made,” Old Craftsman Huang said. “It’s not gonna be cheap, so make sure you know what you’re getting into here.”

“Yes, of course.” You Miao wiped his sweat, looking a little tense.

A couple of the craftsmen were looking at the logs and chatting casually. You Miao knew that it would really cost him this time—Old Craftsman Huang probably wouldn’t let him off for anything less than a couple hundred in silver.

“Think it through,” Old Craftsman Huang said. “This waterwheel, once made, will be a blessing for hundreds of years, if not thousands. I don’t care about the money, but if you’re reluctant to open your wallet, then say so right now so I can take my people and leave. You can’t find guys like these in Anlu; I recruited them from all over Yang Prefecture, so don’t go changing your mind at the last second.”

You Miao stood obediently like an apprentice and said with great solemnity and respect, “I would never do that.”

“They didn’t come to build your project entirely for the money, either, to be frank with you,” Old Craftsman Huang continued. “Such a huge waterwheel project is hard to come by for the average craftsman, and building a machine like this is quite a different matter from building houses.”

The craftsmen nodded in agreement, and Old Craftsman Huang said to them, “You lot have to work hard, too. Take it as both a building project and a learning opportunity. Make sure it’s done well for the young master.”

“That goes without saying, of course,” an older craftsman from the group piped up. “Everyone knows that once we, the craftspeople of Anping, take a job, sloppy’s the last thing it’s gonna be. Right, guys?”

Old Craftsman Huang nodded. “You Miao here is from Sunshower Tea Estate, so there’s no need to worry about being shorted even a single coin for your pay. Everyone, just make sure you do a good job.”

This was the first time the craftsmen had learned of You Miao’s background. Meanwhile, Old Craftsman Huang’s speech was making You Miao incredibly nervous. If this old man wasn’t a swindler, then he really just might be a highly respected master craftsman.

And considering the effort that his apprentices Da-Liang and Xiao-Liang had put into restoring Shen Garden, and the quality of the renovations—it was probably not the former.

That meant that Old Craftsman Huang probably seldom took on work anymore, and had only accepted this project because the waterwheel piqued his interest. If what he’d said was true, then the craftsmen had all come for the waterwheel as well. Few in Yang Prefecture, or indeed even in the entire country, could manage a job of this scale. The skill and experience to be gained in joining the project to build this enormous machine was far more valuable than the pay itself.

Old Craftsman Huang then introduced his eldest apprentice to You Miao—his name was Wu Zhuang, and despite being already in his sixties, was still very sturdy and fit. You Miao exchanged greetings with the craftsmen, then invited them inside.

“Let’s go to the manor first and have some tea?”

“Let’s talk money first,” Old Craftsman Huang said. “I’ve already made you a list of the needed materials, which you will procure and pay for on your own; I won’t charge you for it. Of the people here, twenty are skilled workers. Five hundred coins a day per person, agreeable?”

Okay, okay, that’s not too much, You Miao thought, and said aloud, “Yes, whatever you say, sir.”

“Ten helpers, two hundred coins a day per person,” Old Craftsman Huang continued unhurriedly.

“Sure,” You Miao said.

“You’ll cover two meals: an opening feast before the work starts, and a closing feast once it’s done. A whole pig and a jug of good wine for each.” Old Craftsman Huang turned to the crowd and said, “The rest of the time, you lot can go eat at Guozhuang or Anlu; don’t freeload off Young Master You. It doesn’t look like there’s many people in his manor, it’ll be too much trouble to feed this many mouths.”

“That’s all right,” You Miao said with a smile. “Shouldn’t be too hard to cover daily meals for the worker geges.”

Old Craftsman Huang waved his cane and said disapprovingly, “They’re spoiled, picky eaters. If you’ve got no objections, then it’s settled.”

You Miao hurriedly nodded in agreement. Old Craftsman Huang then peered askance at the basswood logs piled next to the river.

“I was going to have you buy lumber, but you seem prepared already.”

You Miao led Old Craftsman Huang over to check on the logs. “Is this wood useable?”

Old Craftsman Huang tapped on the wood with his cane and nodded. “Hundred twenty-year-old basswood, this is good material. Lads, come plank the timber.”

The craftsman had already spread out beforehand, and at Old Craftsman Huang’s call, they began to unpack their gear and promptly started to assemble planers, strike ink marking strings, and polish their saws.

You Miao moved to go over and help, but Old Craftsman Huang halted him. “Hold it. What’s this lad’s name, the one behind you?”

Li Zhifeng gave his name, and Old Craftsman Huang said, “Boy, have him stay here so that we can send him if anything needs to be acquired last minute.”

You Miao agreed, and Old Craftsman Huang went to sit back down on the rock and waved him over. “Come over and look at the changes I’ve

made to the drawings."

You Miao's blueprint had been crudely drawn, copying bits and pieces from "*Mohist Classics*" and combining them ad hoc without actually learning anything from the text. Old Craftsman Huang pointed to and asked about several of the design points, but You Miao was at a complete loss and his answers were a hit and miss.

"Here I thought you learned the trade from your family!" Old Craftsman Huang snapped irritably. "But turns out you're just another exploiter! Tell me the truth. Who gave you this drawing? Call the original designer over!"

"Sir, I really drew it myself!" You Miao protested miserably. "Wait here a bit, I'll go fetch the books to show you."

You Miao ran up to the manor and returned with a pile of books. Old Craftsman Huang flipped through them, contemplated, and finally nodded in the end.

"I will explain it to you. Listen well, I'm only going over this once."

You Miao took a seat next to Old Craftsman Huang, and the old craftsman explained everything, step by step—from the anchor, chain, bolts, and rivets, to the waterwheel capacity, and so forth. You Miao couldn't help grinning as he slowly began to understand how things worked.

Old Craftsman Huang shot him a look. "Why are you smiling?"

"I'm smiling because I understand now," You Miao replied, still grinning. "Just like how Kassapa smiled knowingly when Buddha held the flower.[76]"

"Hm. That's how it is," Old Craftsman Huang said approvingly. "You've still got things to see to; you two have your work cut out for you."

You Miao took the stack of sheepskin that was drawn with the exploded view diagrams of the entire waterwheel. There were no fewer than a hundred and eight water scroops, and the wooden framework was divided into five sections. There were two chain belts, each six hundred yards in length with six hundred segments apiece, each three feet long. There were also the giant iron hooks for securing the water scoops, and the rotor in the middle made of eight individual components. And then there were pieces

like the central shaft, bearings, rollers, four-way spokes, eight-way spokes, so on and so forth.

The most complex part was the large wheel itself, fastened vertically against the face of the cliff with its lower half submerged in the river, to be rotated by the flow of the water. This, in turn, would drive the fifteen hundred yard-long chain belt to lift the water scoops up the cliff and dump the water into the canal. Whenever the river flooded, the vertical wheel would rise with the water level, and the chained waterwheel would rotate slower with the greater part of it submerged under water. There was also a crank in the middle of the wheel for adjusting the speed at any time.

"We have to buy iron, right? I'll go," Li Zhifeng said.

"Both of you have to go, since you won't be able to explain it by yourself," Old Craftsman Huang said. Then he turned to You Miao. "Boy, make a run to Yang Prefecture first to buy iron, then deliver the iron to the two north and south villages and have them forge the parts according to the diagrams."

You Miao answered with an "okay," groaning inwardly about all the troublesome errands that needed running. All else aside, the amount of iron needed alone was going to be a hassle—common folks would be hard-pressed to purchase that much.

Old Craftsman Huang added, "Take this wood token to the Department of Military Defense of Yang Prefecture and ask for Tang Hui—"

"I know him!" You Miao piped up immediately. "We're friendly, like brothers."

Old Craftsman Huang cast a glance at You Miao and said delightedly, "Even better, then. Tang Hui always comes to my apprentices whenever he needs carts and carriages made. But since you know him already, I'll just hang onto the favor he owes me. Go on then."

You Miao answered affirmatively and got ready to head back to the manor. He thought he should count his money while he was there—he only had fifty silver left, so he would have to sell some stuff. He also mentally calculated the wages for the craftsmen when something came to mind.

“Sir, I should pay you too…”

Old Craftsman Huang waved dismissively. “Just treat me to a nice cup of tea when the work’s done.”

“I couldn’t possibly just…” You Miao smiled politely.

Old Craftsman Huang stared at the river and flashed a rare smile. “I’m old. Who knows when I’ll kick the bucket, and I’m not short on money, either. I’ll just treat the work as a fun exercise for these old bones.”

You Miao didn’t push it, knowing the old man’s temperament. He took Li Zhifeng with him back along the river, and the entire time, his head was full of calculations and plans for his money.

Li Zhifeng could tell he didn’t look too happy and asked, “There isn’t enough money, is there?”

You Miao answered affirmatively. “Let’s take the fox furs to Yang Prefecture to sell first. Too bad we didn’t do this before New Year’s; they would’ve fetched a better price then.”

Li Zhifeng carried You Miao on his back as they hiked up the hill. “Are there armed escort services in Jiangnan? I’ll go mug one.”

You Miao didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Li Zhifeng made a masking gesture. “I’ll wear a mask. No one will know it’s me.”

“Do *not* do that,” You Miao chided. “We’re not actually short on money; my mom’s tea set alone is worth two hundred silver. I just don’t wanna sell it, that’s all. But if it comes to it, I can pawn it off and buy it back later when we have the money.”

Li Zhifeng nodded. You Miao was entertaining all sorts of ideas: he thought about going to his little uncle Qiao Jue to borrow money, then he thought about pawning off stuff from Shen Garden. The first thing he did once they got back to the manor was to take out the abacus and calculate the craftsmen’s wages. The project was going to take a month at the very least, and the wages alone would cost him three hundred and sixty silver.

And then there was also the cost of iron. The waterwheel called for at least four thousand pounds of the metal, if accounting for wastes and scraps, which would cost a hundred and twenty silver. Adding thirty silver for the forge job, and the total would come to a hundred and fifty silver.

Two hundred sticks of bamboo for the scaffolding: twenty silver.

Over five hundred silver… You Miao crunched the numbers in despair, holding his fifty silver in hand and kind of wanting to cry. He thought for a moment, then rummaged through his chests and drawers and dug out the money pouch You Hange had given him. It was a drop in the bucket, but it was *something*. He upended the pouch and poured out its contents…

…And more than ten sparkling ingots of gold fell out with a clatter!

You Miao was startled to say the least.

"Gold?" Li Zhifeng said.

"What's going on? Why's that shoddy brother of mine so generous?"

This was quite the development. You Miao had Li Zhifeng close the door while he took out a ruler and carefully tallied the gold on the table. A couple ingots had fallen under the drawer, and Li Zhifeng bent to pick them up and put them back on the table.

Five, ten…fifteen…eighteen.

Eighteen ingots of gold. You Miao was just about to ask when Li Zhifeng placed the little scale used to weigh broken silvers on the table. You Miao weighed each ingot in turn. Each piece was two taels, for a total of thirty-six taels of bright, shiny gold.

"Thoughtful of him," Li Zhifeng commented.

You Miao made a nasal noise in response as his fingers stroked the ingots in his hand. He noticed that they were all inscribed with "Longevity," and pretty much guessed their origin—they must have been what You Dechuan had secretly given You Hange for his birthday every year. You Hange was eighteen this year, and there were exactly eighteen gold ingots.

You Miao felt a lump in his throat. There was no way he could spend this gift of gold.

You Miao had always been someone who placed a great emphasis on relationships—if someone was good to him, he would pay back the kindness tenfold. With You Hange's entire life savings in his hands, all of a sudden, You Miao didn't know what to do.

At last, he sighed tiredly and asked, "What's one tael of gold worth in silver right now?"

"Not sure. We'll have to go ask," Li Zhifeng replied.

After a long deliberation, You Miao still took the gold and left for Yang Prefectural City with Li Zhifeng.

A couple years ago, a tael of gold had been worth eighteen taels of silver in the capital, but it would appear the exchange rate was higher now in the Jiangnan region. You Miao checked at several gold shops, all of which said twenty and four-tenth taels of silver for one tael of gold. In the end, You Miao just felt like it'd be wrong to cash out the gold, so he ended up going to a pawnshop and pawned the gold You Hange gave him for seven hundred silver.

The guy at the pawn shop marveled endlessly about the moneyed young master while he wrote the receipt, but You Miao only watched him with a deadpan expression. Stuffing the money bills into his robes, he left and went next to the Department of Military Defense for iron.

Yet as it turned out, Tang Hui wasn't currently in the prefecture. The vice-captain said he had gone to the capital on the third day of the new year. *What an impatient guy*, You Miao thought, as he asked after him a bit more. Thankfully, Tang Hui had left instructions that the army must heed You Miao's every request should he come knocking. You Miao wanted to apply for an iron purchase, which troubled the vice-captain, but in the end he still gritted his teeth and got You Miao tickets for six thousand pounds of crude iron.

"This much?" Li Zhifeng asked once they were out of the building.

You Miao had given the vice-captain five silver to smooth things along, and he answered after they exited, "We'll need iron for plows and other

tools too; it'll come in handy in the future. We can redeem it from the Salt and Iron Depot whenever, anyway."

The pair then headed to the Salt and Iron Depot next. The tickets in You Miao's hands drew from the iron issued to the Yang Prefectural Army. It was a good thing they came early, right at the beginning of the year, because there probably wouldn't even be half a pound of iron left if they had come at the end of the year instead. The depot manager was already more than used to selling government salt and iron to private citizens and asked for a twenty silver "processing fee" without beating around the bush. You Miao cussed him out inwardly while smiling agreeably on the outside, obediently paying up. The manager let him into the depot only after the money had been passed over.

The warehouse manager wanted his palms greased too, and You Miao had no choice but to pay him two silver while mentally cursing these money-grubbing bastards. *If I end up a government official, I'll crack your heads open with silver.*

"Let's just redeem all six thousand pounds of iron," You Miao grumbled quietly to Li Zhifeng. "Or else I'll have to pay up again next time."

"We'll have to rent a wagon to move the iron to the pier, then load onto a boat to ferry up the river," Li Zhifeng said.

Six thousand pounds of ingot iron. The mere sight of them made You Miao want to cry. Thankfully, they were fifty pounds per block; had they been thousand-pound chunks, You Miao wouldn't even know who or where to cry to.

"Did you want to go visit your uncle?" Li Zhifeng asked.

"Maybe next time." You Miao plopped down on the pile of iron. "I'm exhausted. Go rent us a wagon while I rest a bit?"

Li Zhifeng headed off to the market for a wagon. They would need to hire a boat too, so he probably wouldn't be back for a while. Sitting outside the Salt and Iron Depot, You Miao stared off into space. He would've brought a book had he known this was going to happen. Just when he was bored out of his mind, however, Li Zhifeng came back. He rose to his feet,

puzzled, only to see that Li Zhifeng had brought someone along—it was Qiao Jue.

"Whatcha doing in the city?" Qiao Jue asked with a smile.

You Miao smiled back. "You came at just the right time."

"I'll go hire a boat," Li Zhifeng said.

Qiao Jue had two servant boys with him. "Don't worry about the wagon, I'll have one sent from home tomorrow to help you haul the goods to the pier. Let Li Zhifeng go hire the boat. Come, let's go stroll around the market."

The servant boys kept watch over the giant pile of iron, and You Miao was just about to say he needn't go to so much trouble when Qiao Jue added, "You don't know this, but Yang Prefectural City is super busy at the start of the year, with everyone here to do business. It's impossible to hire a boat on the day of; you have to book it a day in advance. You'll have to wait until tomorrow to go back. Don't worry about it, though. I know someone that Li Zhifeng can go to at the docks."

Li Zhifeng left again with a note in hand, and You Miao got into a horse-drawn carriage with Qiao Jue to go to the market.

"Come spend the night at my place," Qiao Jue said. "I'll go back with you tomorrow morning and check out the land over there on the way."

"How's it going with the tea saplings?" You Miao asked.

"Heh, like he'd dare object if I want saplings," Qiao Jue replied.

You Miao nodded, and the two dismounted outside the city market. It was just after New Year's, and the breeze felt warm and indolent. The city market of Yang Prefectural City was set up by the river, and merchant stalls both big and small lined both banks. The caress of the spring breeze was pleasant, and willow branches dipped gently into the water, leaving ripples in their wake. It was a bustling scene in a flourishing city, with people going to and fro, filling the market with the lively sounds of commerce.

Qiao Jue and You Miao strolled the market hand in hand, drawing the attention of all the pretty girls there. You Miao paused at a stall selling

knickknacks, and Qiao Jue bought him a belt ornament before pulling him along.

Qiao Jue looked exactly like a handsome, intelligent man of Jiangnan, with a pair of thick, inky brows just like You Miao's grandfather had when he was young. With their pearly white teeth and vibrantly red lips, the pair had their fingers hooked together and swinging back and forth as they walked.

"He's not a terrible guy," Qiao Jue marveled with a sigh when You Miao told him about the money You Hange gave him.

"Mhmm," You Miao agreed. "Well, since he gave me the money, I used it without thinking about it too much. So what's tasty around here?"

Qiao Jue brought You Miao to a place by the river and ordered a plate of fried shrimp and a bowl of fish dumplings. It had been a long time since You Miao had had any Yang Prefecture dishes, and he dug right in. Then, an order of fish skin noodles was added. The fish skin noodles were refreshing and delicious, and the spring prawn fresh from the river was crispy and savory.

"Looks like they also have crispy fried fish. I'll pack some for Li Zhifeng," You Miao said.

"Sure," Qiao Jue said. "I'll take you to the east market later. You'll love it there."

"The east market?" You Miao asked.

"Mhmm."

Qiao Jue paid for the meal after they had eaten, then took You Miao across the bridge. The girls under the bridge looked up at them from beneath their umbrellas, coy smiles on their lips. You Miao didn't know why, but he felt nothing for those gentle-looking girls, and he looked back at them expressionlessly as he snacked on his bag of fried soybeans.

"It's about time to find you a wife," Qiao Jue said with a laugh. "Your dad's been so blithe about it, but I can check if there are any suitable families…"

“Hey, hey,” You Miao hastily cut him off. “Forget it, I can’t afford a wife. Nor do I want to be nagged at by one.”

Qiao Jue squeezed You Miao’s cheeks and teased, “‘Fess up—did you run with the wrong crowd in the capital and turn into a little gay?”

You Miao immediately turned bright red and snapped back, “Like you’re one to talk. It’s all thanks to your influence.”

“You have to get married when the time comes,” Qiao Jue said seriously. “Don’t delay yourself.”

You Miao answered with a “mn,” and Qiao Jue led him by the hand down the bridge, the two stopping and going intermittently. Springtime in Yang Prefecture was indeed lovely, with children running about and playing. The charm of the scenery made one slow down, and feeling lazy, You Miao was reluctant to walk any further.

END VOLUME 1

GLOSSARY

Name Guide

When addressing another person in Chinese, it is the polite convention to refer to them by their title or position rather than their name, especially if the person is in a station above you. Likewise, to convey humility, one would refer to oneself as one's position or a vague, lower-status entity. The direct addresses of "you," "I," or "me" are considered to be vulgar, or imply a more familiar relationship.

Diminutives, Nicknames, Nametags

General

● Da-: "Big." Always a prefix.

● -Er: "Son" or "Child." Always a suffix. An affectionate address from an elder, or used as a familiar diminutive for those of lower status.

● Lao-: "Old." Always a prefix. Used for familiar elders, family, or close friends.

● Xiao-: "Little." Always a prefix.

● -Zi: Same as -Er.

Family

● Bo(bo): Older paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders; example: "Liang-bo."

● Shu(shu): Younger paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders.

● Bomu: Wife of older paternal uncle. Can be used to address familiar elders.

● Da-ge: Oldest brother, or a casual familiar address for an older male friend.

● Di(di): Familiar address for younger brother or a younger male friend.

● Ge(ge): Familiar address for older brother or an older male friend.

● Jie(jie): Familiar address for an older sister or an older female friend.

● Jiu(jiu): Maternal uncle.

● Shenshen, Shenniang: Aunt; specifically, the wife of a younger paternal uncle. Can also be used to address familiar elders.

● Xiandi: "Wise/worthy younger brother." Formal term of respect for a younger brother or a younger male friend.

● Xiao-di: Casual familiar address for a younger brother or a younger male friend. Can also mean "lackey" depending on context.

● Xiao-jiu: "Little (maternal) uncle." Affectionate.

● Xiong: Elder brother, or a familiar address for a male friend.

● Xiongdi: Generic word for "Brother." Can refer to both family or friends.

● Yiniang: Aunt; specifically, the wife of a maternal uncle. Can also mean "Aunt-Mother," a term of address for the concubine of one's father.

● Yuxiong: "Foolish older brother." Formal self-diminutive for an older brother or an older male friend addressing the younger.

When there is more than one family member in the same generation, they are assigned a number according to their birth, and addressed as such rather than by direct names. The eldest is given "Da," then "-Er" for second-oldest, and so on.

Example: Ping Xi is the second son in his family, so he is nicknamed Ping-Er. Qiao Jue calls Qiao Ke-er "san-jie" or "third sis" because she is the third child.

Titles

● Gongzi: Young Master or Gentleman. A broad term of respect for the son of a noble or affluent birth.

● Laoye: Master or Lord; the master of a house or a lord official/officer.

● Shaoye: Young Master or Young Lord. A term of respect used by those in service of the house.

● Shifu: Master or Teacher, usually of a technique or craft.

● Xiucai: A scholarly identity acquired upon completion of the preliminary exams on the juvenile level, but not yet an official civil servant. Xiucai can work as local primary teachers or scribes.

Armed Escort: As the name indicates, an armed escort is a protection service. Merchants and travel groups often pay for this service when traveling long distances or to protect the transportation of cargo.

Barbarians: Ethnic groups outside the border of China, and specifically in this text, the nomadic tribes north of the Great Wall of China. The ones that encroach on the northern Chinese border vary by period. "The Five Barbarian Tribes" or "Wu Hu" is a term that refers to the five non-Han nomadic groups during the Eastern Han dynasty. However, with liberal license, the five named in this novel are: the Quanrong, the Xianbei, the Jie, the Qiang, and the Di.

Beyond the Border/Wall: Refers to the land beyond the Great Wall of China. The Great Wall is a massive, extensive bulwark that stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia. Traditionally built for defense against the peoples north of the Chinese border, the wall consists of multiple "passes" that are major strongholds in strategic points of the wall for both defense and international trade.

Central Plains: Also known as the "Middle Kingdom" or "Midland," it is the part of the North China Plain that surrounds the lower and middle reaches of the Yellow River. It is where the Han ethnicity was conceived and believed to be the center of the world. It is the political,

economic, and cultural center of Chinese civilization for a large part of Chinese history.

Concubinage: In feudal China, a man might have many wives and concubines. A wife is legally married in full convention and ceremony, complete with a bride price and dowry. The principal wife is the first wife, and she is usually given the power to manage the domestic household. The wife's child is "legal-born," or "principal-born," and they are of a higher status than children born of the concubine regardless of age. The eldest son of the "principal-born" will usually become the heir of the house. A legal-born child addresses a concubine as "Aunt-Mother" or "Yiniang."

A concubine is purchased with a bride price, but she is not legally married and is often taken into a household without ceremony. A concubine's name is not recorded in the clan pedigree. The concubine's child is "common-born," and they are of a lower status than children born of the legal wife regardless of age. A common-born child addresses the wife as "Mother" and their birth mother as "Aunt-Mother" or "Yiniang," though they may still refer to their mother as such in private.

Feudal Caste System: The feudal caste system is ranked by each caste's contribution to society. The "common people" are the Farmer, the Artisan, and the Merchant. It is as follows:

Upper Class:

- **Royals**
- **Gentry/Scholar Official**

Common People:

- **Farmer**
- **Artisan**
- **Merchant**

Lower Class:

- **Servant/Entertainer/Prostitute**

- **Soldiers (Infantry, as they are often drafted from criminals or the idle unemployed)**
- **Slave**

Holidays:

● Chinese New Year: The most important holiday on the calendar, and marks the start of a new year. An important time for family gatherings and wrapping up business from the previous year.

● Shangyuan/Lantern Festival/Yuanxiao: Shangyuan Festival, also known as Yuanxiao, is the Lantern Festival. It is held on the first full moon of the new year, marking the end of Lunar New Year.

Imperial State Exam: a civil service examination system for selecting candidates for state bureaucracy. Civil Service and Scholarship are the highest of prestige for a citizen regardless of background.

Mohism: Mozi (470-391 BC) is an ancient Chinese philosopher who came after Confucius. The two schools of philosophy were seen as rivals during the warring era. Mohists have developed the sciences of fortification and statecraft and wrote treatises on government. Mohists were often hired by warring states as advisors of the state..

Red Pocket/Envelope: A monetary gift. Red is the color for joyous occasions.

Siheyuan: A traditional courtyard-style house that consists of four buildings that form a rectangular box. The main house is positioned in the north and faces the south. There can be multiple main entrances depending on the size of the siheyuan. Immediately past the first main entrance is the spirit screen, a wall erected for privacy, and superstitiously, to protect the house from evil spirits.

Measurement

This translation uses predominantly the American Imperial System, and at times Metric. The numbers are approximated for ease of reading and are not to be scrutinized.

Currency

The currency used is ingots of gold, silver, and copper coins. They are further weighed to calculate denominations.

1 tael of gold = 30 taels of silver

1 tael of silver = 1000 copper coins

1 mace of silver = 100 copper coins

Broken Silver: Refers to silver pieces that are smaller than one tael and used like loose change, their value dependent on their weight.

One String of Coins: Another way to say 1000 copper coins, as the coins are usually stringed.

Time

Shichen: The day is divided into 12 shichen with roughly 2 hours per shichen.

- **Zi [midnight]: 11pm - 1am**
- **Chou: 1am - 3am**
- **Yin: 3am - 5am**
- **Mao [sunrise]: 5am - 7am**
- **Chen: 7am - 9am**
- **Si: 9am - 11am**
- **Wu [noon]: 11am - 1pm**
- **Wei: 1pm - 3pm**
- **Shen: 3pm - 5pm**
- **You [sunset]: 5pm - 7pm**
- **Xu [dusk]: 7pm - 9pm**
- **Hai: 9pm - 11pm**

Geng: The night after sundown is further divided into five geng, otherwise known as five periods or five watches. At the start of every watch, a Gengfu, or a Night-Watchman, will make a round of the city and strike a wooden plank to signal the time.

- **1 geng: 7pm - 9pm**
- **2 geng: 9pm - 11pm**
- **3 geng: 11pm - 1am**
- **4 geng: 1am - 3am**
- **5 geng: 3am - 5am**

Incense Time: Incense sticks are made to measure time by a day, an hour, half an hour, and so forth. When referenced in this novel, it means 30 minutes.

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[1] "Silk strings" is a homophone for "thoughts" and "longing."

[2] The word used here is "mandarin ducks," which are symbols of love.

[3] Xie Lingyun is a renowned Song Dynasty poet known for his travels. The Concubines Xiang are a pair of twin sisters who committed suicide by jumping into a river after the death of their husband, the emperor.

[4] Reference to Xianlian Collection, and how it describes the two herbs as spiritual and pure.

[5] Referring to the previous two classics described: when not even the pure and transcendent ancients can bear the loss of their lovers, how can you expect mere mortals to manage?

[6] The four occupations in the Confucian class system are Civil Scholars, Farmers, Artisans, and Merchants. Their level of importance is listed in descending order and is based on their ability to benefit a nation and its people.

[7] Donation to the government as a form of bribery. One can "aid" government causes in return for a title or position.

[8] The final round of the imperial state exam is the palace exam, presided over by the emperor himself. Three [甲 / jia] ranks of Jinshi are selected—the first rank has the top three scorers, followed by rank two and three. The number of chosen Jinshi for rank two and three varies by dynasty.

[9] There are six ministries under the emperor: Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Revenue, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of War, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Public Works. The Chancellor heads all six.

[10] Shangyuan Festival, also known as Yuanxiao, is the Lantern Festival. It is held on the first full moon of the new year, marking the end of Lunar New Year.

[11] When a prince (son of the Emperor) comes of age, he is granted a Prince title of the first or second rank and given land, which he will then move to and govern.

[12] A nickname. “Ping” is a surname and “er” means “two.”

[13] The Royal Academy manages music, dance, and theatre for the purposes of court entertainment. The academy also provides prostitutes, who came from various backgrounds: political enemies, prisoners of war, or the family members of disgraced court officials. The academy is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Rites.

[14] Money bills, or paper money, are promissory notes signed by the government or an officiated money house (an olden times bank).

[15] Book boys/ 书童 are errand boys during study. “Study companion” and “book boy” are two different roles in this context; here, the servants assign someone among them to be study companion each day.

[16] Muscle paralysis powder is a common poison in classic literature that paralyzes a person’s bones, tendons, and muscles. The poison is tasteless and colorless, and the victim is rendered unable to use inner qi. After ten days, the poison will dissolve on its own. If poisoned more than once, the victim will die.

[17] An era name is given to a regime or dynasty for year identification and numbering.

[18] A small handheld pot with a piece of burning coal inside for warming. It can also be tucked into sleeves.

[19] A fictional medicine with a cool name.

[20] 叔 / Shu: A casual address for a paternal uncle younger than one’s own father.

[21] Wang Zhaojun is one of the four great beauties of ancient China. She was a palace lady-in-waiting who was chosen as a sacrifice by Emperor Yuan to keep peace at the border, and was given in marriage to the chanyu (leader) of the Hun people. “Lady Zhaojun Crossing the Frontier” is the famous tale of her journey to a foreign land for the sake of peace.

[22] The fictitious name for the ruling dynasty in this story.

[23] The Yin Mountains are in present-day Inner Mongolia.

[24] When regional tribute to the palace is insufficient, the local government can procure more resources from the local merchants. Regional Tribute is called “Suiban,” and Procured Tribute is called “Caiban.” As a local merchant, You Deyou would have a Procurement Carriage.

[25] “Ge” or “gege” is an intimate, casual address for an elder brother or friend.

[26] A verse from “To My Grandnephew, Han Xiang” by Han Yu of the Tang Dynasty. When he was banished to Chao Prefecture, Han Yu composed this poem on his journey there. It expressed his indignation at being loyal yet proclaimed guilty, and at being banished despite being innocent.

[27] Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can call for these animal parts as ingredients.

[28] These lines are a mash-up and reword of verses from the poem “Caiwei” from the *Book of Songs*, the oldest compilation of poetry in China. The rewritten lines are originally from the 2012 movie *Painted Face 2*.

[29] Lyrics from *Song of the Yue*, a compilation of Yue folksongs spanning from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States era (770BC to 221BC). The songs depict cross-class affections between peasants and the aristocracy. The Kingdom of Yue is in the Southeast, the region of modern-day Guangdong (Canton).

[30] Referring to border control points, or manned tolls on the roads.

[31] Yiniang, or Aunt-Mother, is how children addressed their father’s concubine.

[32] A spirit screen is a single wall erected to protect the entrance. It can be situated either outside or inside the gate it shields.

[33] Women who marry or enter a house as a concubine do not take the husband’s surname. They are referred to by their own surname.

[34] The Chinese differentiate between paternal and maternal uncles. The ones being referred to here are maternal uncles, which connotes a different family that—while connected by marriage—have no rights or say in how the You family conducts their affairs.

[35] In Traditional Chinese Medicine, anger is said to inflame the liver.

[36] The Miao [淼] in You Miao’s name is composed of three Shui [Water/水] and resembles the character Sen [Forest/森]. Attaching the character Lin [Woods/林] makes his nickname “a forest of water.”

[37] Refers to Chinese bonsai.

[38] A verse from “Intrigues of the Warring States.” This verse means the closer one is to success, the harder the road becomes, and the more one must persevere.

[39] Wu [Five/五] and Ba [Eight/八]. If there are many elders in the family, they are addressed by the number they are in line by age. The Chinese also differentiate between address for uncles older and younger than one’s own father/grandfather. You Miao is using “shu,” meaning the granduncles are younger than his own grandfather.

[40] Wugeng [Fifth Watch/五更] is between 3 A.M. to 5 A.M.

[41] Verses from “The Northern Expedition” by Li Yi, Tang Dynasty. This poem depicts the march of an army and the spirit of the soldiers. The grand, wistful sound of the flute expresses their longing for home.

[42] Two verses from “Shen Garden” by Lu You, Song Dynasty. The poem mourns his star-crossed lover and ex-wife Tang Wan.

[43] Shen Garden [沈园], currently named Shenshi Garden [沈氏园], is named after the family name of its original owners. Shen Garden is one of the most famous gardens of Jiangnan, and subsequently immortalized as a Love Garden by Lu You’s sorrowful poems.

[44] Tang Wan was said to be beautiful and intelligent, and a writer in her own right. However, her marriage of love to Lu You was forcibly ended by Lu You's mother. The anguish ruined her health and she ultimately passed away from depression.

[45] Imperial State Exams are held every three years, but sometimes the emperor would call for exams outside the regular scheduled ones under special circumstances. Because of the additional opportunity these special exams present, they are called Grace Exams.

[46] From "Encourage Learning" by Emperor Zhao Heng, Song Dynasty. The verse means that if one studies hard, one will roll in riches and beautiful women.

[47] "Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People" [齐民要术] by Jia Sixie, Northern Wei Dynasty, is the most completely preserved of ancient Chinese agricultural texts.

[48] "Exploitations of the Works of Nature" [天工开物] by Song Yingxing, Ming Dynasty, is a technical encyclopedia.

[49] "The Dream Pool Essays" [梦溪笔谈] by Shen Kuo, Song Dynasty, is an encyclopedic work that covered a range of topics from Traditional Chinese Medicine to engineering and early archaeology.

[50] Shennong [神农], venerated as the God of Agriculture, is credited for teaching the Chinese how to farm, how to recognize and use herbs, and also the invention of a number of tools.

[51] "Elder of the Wild" [野老], pre-Qin period (Paleolithic Age to Qin Dynasty 221 B.C.,) is one of the oldest books on agriculture in China.

[52] It is a folk custom for workers in a skilled trade to worship the trade's founding father. The founding father is regarded as the divine guardian of their respective trade, much like a patron saint.

[53] The baojia system [保甲] is a community-based law enforcement and civil control system that extended to local tax collection. Ten families made up one jia, and ten jia made up one bao. The leader of the bao, or community captain in this translation, acts as a buffer between the people and the government.

[54] Guapian is a type of green tea.

[55] Surname Liang, Big and Little Liang respectively. These are nicknames, and not their real names.

[56] Lu Ban, also known as Gongshu Ban, was a structural engineer, carpenter, and inventor from Zhou Dynasty. He is revered as the God of Builders and Contractors. "Treatise of Gongshu" is a compilation of his work.

[57] Refers to the name of the indicated tea.

[58] Refers to Da-Liang's real name.

[59] A fable that tells of a man who believes he can move a mountain if he digs long and hard enough. He does succeed in the end, and the moral of the story is that one who is determined

can accomplish anything. However, You Miao is referring to the literal moving of the mountain in this context.

[60] A renowned rice wine. It used to be a flower-based spirit, but it gradually changed to rice wine as time passed. When a boy is born, the family makes and buries a jug of wine underground to ferment; it is called Champion Red in the hopes the boy grows up to become a champion. If the baby is a girl, it is called Maiden's Red. The jug of wine is unearthed on the day of the child's wedding.

[61] Refers to the region north of the Yellow River.

[62] Since the days of the Northern Song Dynasty, the imperial court propelled the idea that one can only gain wealth and prosperity through scholarship and civil service rather than military service. This was intended to suppress the military from expanding their control and influence within the government, which was a notable problem in the previous reign.

[63] "Song of Divination - Ode to the Plum Blossom" by Lu You, Song Dynasty. Plum trees only bloom in the winter. Uncaring for the spring flowers that shun it, it stands by its principles unmoved until the end.

[64] Meaning "Little brother You."

[65] A renowned poet of the Northern Song Dynasty.

[66] On the topic of the **Tea Ceremony:**

Three Criteria: Good tea brewed from fresh spring water and using clean instruments, good weather, and merry and elegant guests of similar tastes and temperaments. The Three Non-Criteria are the opposite of these.

Thirteen Properties: Delineate the appropriate or fitting times to have tea: when done with freeness of time and spirit, when done in good educated company, when done in good quiet settings, when done while reciting poetry, when done while composing art and poetry, when rising from sleep, while rousing one's consciousness, when done with purity of offering, when one is in an exquisite setting, when done for the purpose of inspiration and reflection, when done with a full appreciation and understanding of tea, and when done with the presence of a companion or attendant for boiling water and serving.

Seven Taboos: poor techniques, poor instruments, disharmony between host and guest, being overly restricted by dress and etiquette, mixing flavors by eating meat, rushing the process, and a poor setting.

[67] Ceramics known as Ru wares produced by the Ru Kiln were an extremely rare type of Chinese pottery exclusively used by the Northern Song Dynasty's imperial court, and for only a short period of time.

[68] "The Classic of Tea" by Lu Yu of the Tang Dynasty is the oldest surviving monograph on tea.

[69] The fifteenth of the first lunar month is the first full moon of the new year, as well as the last day of the New Year celebration. It is also called the Yuanxiao Festival, the Shangyuan Festival, or the Lantern Festival.

[70] The name of one of the top ten green tea varieties of China.

[71] The name of a particular variety of tea.

[72] Silkworms eat mulberry leaves.

[73] The "Classic of Rites" [Liji/礼记] is a collection of ancient texts describing etiquette and ceremonies. It is part of the Confucian canon.

[74] Meaning "Little Uncle (maternal)."

[75] A text of the Confucian canon that became central to both primary education and the Imperial State Exams.

[76] Buddha once held up a flower in front of a group of people without saying anything. Only Kassapa smiled in understanding, as he had become enlightened—it was a smile that showed joy from within.